



Trauma and Memory:

The case of the Great Famine in the People's Republic of China (1959-1961)

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik

Department of East Asian Studies, Sinology

University of Vienna

Keywords:

Historiography, literature, trauma, memory, Great Leap Forward, Great Famine, China

Abstract:

Taking the Great Famine from 1959 to 1961 in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward as an example, the article presents an inquiry into different aspects of trauma and memory in the context of culture and politics in the PRC. It shows that even in a highly politicized environment like the PRC politics in its capacity to either suppress or instigate public debate about individual or collective memories is not the only, probably not even the most important factor in making individual remembrances about events of traumatic dimensions enter the realm of communicative and possibly cultural memory. Besides psychological factors complicating communication about traumatic experiences cultural particularities have to be taken into account in order to be able to answer the question why the Great Famine could have been the subject of a taboo for such a long time and why it eventually re-emerged at the surface of public debate during the nineteen eighties and nineties. While party historians are still reluctant to discuss the disaster of the Great Famine at length, literature is serving as a forum of debate and remembrance on what

peasants went through during the late nineteen fifties. Different novels are discussed in the article to show how the perspective of those who directly participated in the events differs from the next generation trying to answer the question why people in China could have gone through all these sufferings without asking any questions. The explanations they give stress cultural particularities such as ancestor worship compelling people to forget the suffering of the past if only enough people survive to preserve the continuity of the clan (Yu Hua). The repetitiveness of traumatic experiences occurring in 20th century Chinese history is seen as another reason why the Great Famine could be tabooed for more than 30 years (Mo Yan). But besides these factors stressing that trauma is dealt with differently in different cultural settings the fact that the Great Famine as part of the Great Leap Forward had been a topic of inner party debate ever since it took place has to be seen as a political factor of major importance both instrumental in this taboo and in instigating public debate on the estimated 35 million victims of what is called the greatest famine in world history.

關鍵詞

史學，文學，精神創傷，回憶，大躍進，大飢荒，中國

摘要

本文就中華人民共和國 (PRC) 的政治、文化背景，從精神創傷 (trauma) 和回憶 (memory) 兩個不同層面來探究大躍進的餘波「大飢荒」(1959 到 1961 年)。

研究顯示，即使在高度政治化的環境下像在中國，政治在壓抑或煽動有關個人或集體記憶之公共議論方面的能力，並不是造成對那些具有精神創傷層面事件的個人記憶進入可無隱諱交談的文化記憶範圍去的唯一因素，可能也不是最重要的因素。

除了心理學的因素使有關精神創傷經驗的傳達變得更為複雜以外，為了要回答為何「大飢荒」能夠如此長久的成為禁忌話題及為何它最後在 1980-90 年代又浮現在公共議論中等問題，我們就必須考慮到文化的特質。

當黨史家仍不情願詳細的討論「大飢荒」所造成的災害時，文學早就被供作是討論農民在 50 年代末期的遭遇之議論園地。本文裡討論了許多不同的小說，以顯示那些親歷其事者的立場，與企圖回答為何在中國的人民竟能歷經這麼多的苦難而不提出任何質疑這個問題的下一代如何不同。有些解釋他們特別強調文化的特質(見余華 Yu Hua 的作品)¹，如祖先崇拜強使人遺忘過去所受的苦，只要有足夠的人存活下來以繼續家族的延續。在二十世紀中國歷史裡重複發生的精神創傷性經驗，似乎可以當作是為何「大飢荒」能被當成禁忌達三十年之久的另一個原因(見莫言 Mo Yan 的作品)²。

但是，除了這些強調對精神創傷的處理方式因文化背景不同而異的因素外，從大飢荒發生以來，「大飢荒是大躍進的一部份」一直是黨內爭論的一個主題。這個事實必須被視為一個相當重要的政治因素。這個政治因素是助成禁忌形成的工具，也是煽動公開討論有關這場估計有三千五百萬人喪生的史上最慘之飢荒的工具。

¹ 余華，中國大陸近代作家，著有《活著》、《許三觀賣血記》、《在細雨中呼喊》等作品。

² 莫言，中國大陸近代作家，著有《透明的紅蘿蔔》、《爆炸》、《枯河》、《紅高粱家族》、《酒國》等作品。

The Hong Kong based journal “Zhengming” published a report on the outcome of a poll among intellectuals in Mainland China in early 2000. People were asked to name the ten most important events of 20th century Chinese history. As it turned out, the Cultural Revolution headed the list, followed by the Great Leap Forward, including the Great Famine of the years 1959 to 1961.¹ This is the clearest sign that after years of tabooing the Great Famine this catastrophe that – according to recent estimations – might have caused 35 to 42 million deaths² is no longer unimpeachable in China. On the contrary, if we look at the other events on the list we come to realize that the mentioning of the Great Leap Forward among the ten most important events of the 20th century Chinese history is part of the process of rewriting modern Chinese history in which revolutionary euphoria is replaced by a more pessimistic view that takes into account the high death toll of China’s road to modernity. This change is of far-reaching consequences, and the mentioning of the Great Leap Forward as well as the Great Famine is central to the reinterpretation of modern Chinese history.

The Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine in official Chinese historiography

The [Great] Famine (*da ji'e* 大飢餓 or *da jihuāng* 大飢荒) is a new word in the context of official historiography in Mainland China. Up until the late nineteen seventies, the years from 1959 to 1961 were euphemized as the “three difficult years” (*san nian kunnan shiqi* 三年困難時期) caused by a series of natural disasters hitting the country with all their might. At that time, the Great Leap Forward was regarded as a positive attempt at putting Mao’s revolutionary strategy into practice, which is why it was not mentioned among the possible causes of the difficulties that had come up in its aftermath.

The period of readjustment that followed the Great Leap was at that time criticized for its right opportunist tendencies while the CCP’s ability to quickly overcome the economic problems of the “three difficult years” was praised. What was left out from the writing of modern Chinese history during the Cultural Revolution was the fact that most of those cadres that had helped

¹ Luo Bing 2000, for a list of all events see appendix.

² Teiwes and Sun 1999: 5.

solve the problems during the “three difficult years” were later to become the main targets of attack during the Cultural Revolution.

Changes in this way of dealing with the Great Leap Forward and its aftermath first became noticeable in 1980/81 when discussions were going on related to the later to be adopted “Resolution on Some Questions Regarding the History of the CCP Since the Founding of the PRC”. The Resolution itself states: “Mainly because of mistakes made during the Great Leap Forward as well as during the Campaign Against Rightists the economy of our country came across severe difficulties during the years 1959 to 1961. The state as well as the people suffered great losses as the consequence of natural disasters hitting the country and the Soviet government tearing treaties and betraying friendship which made the situation even more difficult.”³ The Resolution clearly relates the difficulties of the years 1959 to 1961 to the Great Leap Forward, but by hinting vaguely at “economic difficulties” it avoids speaking openly of the enormous difficulties arising from the fact that the government was no longer able to feed the people.

Having had the opportunity to interview one of the major ghostwriters of the 1981 Resolution before it was passed in July 1981, I know that the original draft for the Resolution must have included more information on the three difficult years. In October 1980 while introducing the contents of the draft resolution Liao Gailong told me that during the years 1959 to 1961 as many people had died from starvation in the PRC as had died as the consequence of collectivization in the Soviet Union. By this he hinted at approximately 35 million people who have to be regarded as victims of the Great Famine.⁴ It was quite clear that Liao Gailong mentioned the estimated number of victims so as to radically criticize the Great Leap Forward and to destroy the ideal of the so-called Maoist development strategy. However, in this aspect his formulation of the draft resolution was obviously not accepted by the party leadership, which passed and published the Resolution on July 1, 1989.

The Great Famine does not exist in the 1981 Resolution. Nevertheless, even though for many years to come the Great Leap Forward did not attract major attention in discussions on recent historical events in the PRC, the fact

³ Resolution 1981: 24.

⁴ Personal communication 1988.

that it is today mentioned among the 10 most important events in 20th century Chinese history is linked to the fact that the CCP itself started to lift the taboo of criticizing the Great Leap some 20 years ago. In recent years especially, several publications have come out focusing on the Great Leap Forward and the People's Commune system. These publications sharply criticize the strategy of the Great Leap Forward and call for a "farewell from [our] ideals"⁵.

At the same time, Penny Kane's book "Famine in China, 1959-61"⁶ was translated into Chinese and can today be bought in Mainland China⁷, while an author like Chen Dabin, a former prominent journalist for the Xinhuashe, dares to publish a book under the title of "Changes Brought to Us by the Great Famine" in which he argues that up until today the peasants' attitude towards the Communist Party's as well as the CCP's attitude towards the peasant population are shaped by the experience of the Great Famine.⁸ Last but not least, the most official publication on party history, the journal "Research on Party History" published an article by Li Chengrui, the Director of the State Statistical Bureau of the PRC, in which he discusses western estimates of the death toll for the years 1959 to 1961. While criticizing most of his western colleagues, Li comes up with a death toll of 14 to 17 million people having died as a consequence of starvation during the Great Famine.⁹

There is, however, still a big gap between Li Chengrui's numbers and what is estimated as a death toll of 35 to 42 millions in the West¹⁰ or what Liao Gailong hinted at in his interview.¹¹ But what is even more astonishing than this difference in numbers is the fact that it took so long for this critical event of modern Chinese history to be discussed in public.

While the answer seems to be quite easy as to why party historiography did not bother to give more details about the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine, it seems difficult to understand why the flourishing unofficial historiography, eager to discuss everything people have on their minds, has not yet

⁵ Zhang Letian 1998.

⁶ Kane 1988.

⁷ Kane 1993.

⁸ Chen Dabin 1998.

⁹ Li Chengrui 1997.

¹⁰ Teiwes and Sun 1999: 5.

¹¹ Personal communication, Liao Gailong 1988.

given an account of the Great Famine. Even though journalists like Dai Qing and Ye Yonglie are known for their talents and courage in destroying taboos in Chinese history writing, none were among the first to discuss the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine in detail¹². As a matter of fact, contrary to our expectations, it seems as if party historiographers of the highest rank such as Hu Sheng were among the first to speak openly about the phenomenon of wide spread starvation during the late 1950's.

In his account of party history written for the party's 70th anniversary, Hu Sheng writes:

In comparison to 1957 the average grain consumption of the rural as well as urban population in 1960 dropped by 19.4% with the grain consumption of the rural population going down by 23.7%. The consumption of vegetable oil dropped by 23%, the per capita consumption of meat by an astounding 70%. Because of insufficient supply edema was widespread. The death toll rose sharply. According to official statistics, the population of the whole country went down by 10 million in 1960. In areas that were hit most badly, such as the Xinyang 信陽 County of Henan Province, the death rate in 9 villages was with 100 per thousand twice as high as normal. Even though we had hoped for the masses to live better lives within the shortest possible period of time, we had to face these most deplorable consequences. These were the most severe consequences of and lessons from the mistakes, which we had made during the Great Leap Forward and during collectivization.¹³

From interviews with peasants hit by the Great Famine as well as from the big bulk of memoir literature we know that the memory of the Great Famine had not faded away completely. On the contrary, it looks as if the memory of the Great Famine played at least some role during the Cultural Revolution. From Yang Xiguang's memoirs we know that people were released from prison at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution who had started criticizing the PRC regime as a consequence of widespread starvation during the years 1959 to 1961. As some of them had started building dissident organizations in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward they were first persecuted, but later

¹² Barmé 1991, 1993, Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 1999.

¹³ Hu Sheng 1991: 369.

released from prison in the hope of instrumentalizing them in the fight against those cadres responsible for the politics of readjustment after the Great Leap. From Yang Xiguang's memoir we also know that very soon these people were taken back to prison to stay there for the rest of the Cultural Revolution. Only few of them survived.¹⁴

Young intellectuals sent to the countryside report that they heard peasants talking with tears in their eyes about family members having died during the Great Famine without knowing whether these peasants were talking about a famine that had taken place during the years of Communist rule or before. Finally it seems as if the fundamentalist discussion on Marxism-Leninism and its application to Chinese history during the late fifties also has something to do with the then ongoing famine in China. Radical critiques of dogmatic historiography such as that by the then deputy major of Peking and renowned historian Wu Han were obviously the result of deep disappointment with the performance of the CCP, which had won them for the Communist side by promising to end the terrible suffering of the masses as soon as possible.¹⁵ Wu Han, too, was victimized during the very early phase of the Cultural Revolution for what he had articulated since the late 1950's.

Today, Chinese peasants openly refer to the Great Famine when voicing their doubts about the CCP's ability to guarantee the well-being of the people. As Yang Dali and Chen Dabin pointed out, the party leadership is well aware of this lack of confidence on the side of the peasants, and one of the reasons why it decided in favor of de-collectivization in 1978 was the danger for the stability of the CCP regime arising from these circumstances.¹⁶

Trauma and Memory

The more we become aware of the memory related to the Great Leap and the Great Famine the more the question arises as to how it was possible to ban from public discussion the death of possibly 30 million people. And looking at it from today's perspective we also have to ask: How is it possible that Chinese

¹⁴ Yang Xiguang 1994.

¹⁵ Yang Xiguang 1994, Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 1988.

¹⁶ Yang Dali 1996, Chen Dabin 1998.

intellectuals rank the Great Leap and the Great Famine second among the ten most important events of 20th century Chinese history today after a silence of more than 30 years? In order to answer this question, we have to learn more about the specific character of the event before discussing the kind of memory it produces.

Quite obviously, the Great Famine is not just one among the many events of 20th century Chinese history. It was a catastrophe of major consequences. If the estimated death toll reflects at least to a certain degree the dimensions of what happened during the years 1959 to 1961, we have to take into account that the number of deaths was roughly equal to the total population of a densely populated province in China. We know that some regions such as Anhui, Henan and Hubei were hit more severely than others, but if we estimate the rural population of China in the late 1950's at about 600 million people, 35 million deaths nearly amounts to 5% of the total peasant population. Even when comparing the number of victims of the Great Famine with the death toll of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937 to 1945 (which is estimated to be at 10 to 15 million victims¹⁷) or the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976 (with approximately 1 million deaths¹⁸) the Great Famine sticks out as an event of most dramatic moral dimensions.

Historical events of this dimension and tragedy have recently been discussed in the context of trauma and memory in Germany. Many books have been published discussing the impact of the Holocaust on the psyche of individual victims as well as culprits and debating the question of how these experiences cannot be integrated into the writing of history.¹⁹ This is as true for individual histories as it is for collective histories. Traumatic experiences are normally neither part of individual life histories nor of collective histories. It is a widespread phenomenon that those who survive the disaster prefer not to talk about their experiences while at the same time being repeatedly haunted in their dreams by the memory of what they have gone through²⁰. From research that was done with survivors of the Holocaust after WW II we know that most of them managed to live a seemingly normal life after having gone through

¹⁷ Eastman 1986: 547.

¹⁸ Courtois et al. 1997: 561.

¹⁹ For an example see Bronfen et al. 1999.

²⁰ Herrman 1992.

years in German concentration camps and that they were quite successful in integrating themselves into their respective communities.²¹ On the other side, the generation of those Germans that were directly or indirectly involved into the Holocaust has been quite reluctant to voice their memories, and in both cases it is the next generation, the children of those directly involved, that comes up with questions and the wish to fill the blank left open by the silence on the side of their parents.²² The trauma experienced by those directly involved is experienced as a vacancy by the next generation, a vacuum which they long to fill in order to be able to complete the historical narrative.²³ But while the silence of those directly involved reflects the trauma in its meaninglessness and contingency, the hope of the next generation reflects the wish to overcome this state of inexplicability and integrate the mystery of the traumatic experience into history. After having focused on criticizing the silence of the directly involved generation in political terms during the nineteen sixties and seventies, we now learn from the research of the next generation that there is more to this silence than just a lack of political consciousness and morale.²⁴

The event itself with its traumatic character generates a certain memory pattern in which the trauma is encapsulated as a trauma by those who survive while the next generation strives for integrating the trauma into the historical narrative, making the inexplicable explainable and de-traumatizing the trauma. This pattern of memory is true for individuals having gone through a traumatic experience and it also exerts its influence on the possibility of developing collective memory related to traumatic events in history. If those who were directly involved in the catastrophe, be it as victim or culprit, tend not to voice their remembrances they do not participate in formulating what is to become the collective memory of the event. This means that the event can either be easily forgotten or – if seen from the perspective of those directly involved – distorted. Those who participate in defining the collective memory of the catastrophic event de-traumatize the trauma by integrating into the historical narrative that which is not integratable. Their story inevitably must be different from the memory of those who lived through the trauma.

²¹ Hardtmann 1992.

²² Dan Bar-On 1999.

²³ Weigel 1999: 69, Tas 1995.

²⁴ Weigel 1999: 66.

While this statement might be an adequate description of what has been going on in Germany, it does not seem to be true for all people, all countries and all times. First of all, while most people seem to react according to the above-mentioned pattern, there is a possibility to consciously escape from it. In Germany, for example, a very small minority of intellectuals propagated “self purification” (*Selbstreinigung*) as a way of overcoming the trauma of being involved in the Holocaust, in WW II and the Nazi terror immediately after the defeat of the Hitler regime.²⁵ In the US, some of the veterans from the Vietnam War suffering under post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)²⁶ tried to find relief from their haunting memories by joining the Anti-Vietnam-War-Movement and by getting organized into veteran associations which gave them the possibility to communicate their experiences to people who had undergone the same kind of experience²⁷. In both cases, the conscious effort to escape from the memory pattern as generated by a traumatic experience coincided with an overall change of political attitudes and strategies discussed in the media in favor of taking over responsibility for mistakes and apologizing to the victims. While this obviously did not lead to a widespread effort to deviate from the usual pattern of memory, it also did not encourage the victims to voice their affliction openly. This should remind us that the political climate is not the only relevant factor when analyzing the question of why a certain event has been avoided within a community of people for a certain time. The time factor plays a decisive role, both on the side of the victims and the culprits. What is true for traumatized individuals (that there needs to be a period of latency before they are able to articulate memories related to the trauma) seems also to be true for traumatized collectives. But this means that, as long as the traumatized individuals stay silent, there is no way of developing collective memories of the traumatic event other than inventing them from the point of view of those who do not have personal memories of it.

²⁵ For an example see Huch 1997 and Schwiedrzik 2000.

²⁶ See Perconte et al. 1991, Hyer et al. 1989, Hammarberg 1994, Funari et al. 1991.

²⁷ For a vivid description of this process see the film “Born on the 4th of July” by Tom Cruise.

The Politics of Trauma and Memory

Another approach, which we have to take in order to come to grips with our problem, is focused on understanding the process of how individual memories are communicated in public and eventually become part of the historical narrative. In this context, Jan Assmann, with his concept of “cultural memory”, can help us to see memory as a process in which individual remembrances become collective memories, which then develop to form something he calls communicative memory. Events that are integrated into communicative memory are open to discussion, but they are not yet part of the cultural memory forming the basis for the historical narrative acknowledged to be valid beyond the limits of time and space. Instead they often prepare the ground for counter-narratives that will eventually replace the long held interpretation of history.²⁸

Using Jan Assmann’s categories, the Great Leap Forward and an interpretation of the events of the second half of the 1950’s including the Great Famine have obviously for quite a long period of time been collective memories only known to those who had directly been involved. The villages that had been hit most severely, families having lost their relatives, whoever had suffered under malnutrition at the time, must have kept these experiences in mind. But as the Great Famine was clearly linked to the Great Leap Forward, and as the Great Leap Forward had turned out to be a major topic of inner party struggle, people were wise enough not to discuss the Great Famine in public. This seems to be the main mechanism that enabled the party leadership to enforce a taboo on discussion of the Great Leap and its abominable consequences. This mechanism, however, could only work for the urban population that had suffered malnutrition, but was not as badly affected as the rural population, and that was best informed as to the political debates going on among the CCP leadership. The risk of openly discussing the “mistakes” of the Great Leap was known to them and was believed to be high enough to discourage open debate, especially when seen against the background of only minor sufferings. On the other hand, the peasants who had suffered most and knew only little about the danger of discussing their sufferings in public, were cut off from any means of

²⁸ Assmann 1997.

spreading the knowledge of what had happened in their villages beyond the limits of their respective village or county. This might be an explanation as to why they talked without hesitation to the sent-down (*xia xiang* 下鄉) young intellectuals about their sufferings. But these young people from the cities, who must have been children between the age of 6 to 9 during the years 1959 to 1961, either could not imagine that something like the Great Famine had happened in their country under Communist leadership or else they understood that the Great Famine was something that could not to be talked about. Thus, apart from the fact that the CCP leadership had reasons to ban the Great Famine from public discussion, both the highly fragmented character of the Chinese countryside and its remoteness from the urban centers and the structural dominance of the CCP leadership and the urban elites over the public sphere were also instrumental in making a whole society seemingly forget about the Great Famine.

At the same time as the process of forgetting was going on, first steps were taken to prepare the ground for a later re-emergence of the event. In Jan Assmann's terms, this means that at the same time as all kinds of measures were being taken to hinder the individual and collective memories from becoming communicative, the possibility for a later integration of the event into the communicative as well as cultural memory was being prepared. As we know from our research, the fact that millions of people died of starvation during the years 1959 to 1961 can be traced down to county archives, and this is not only true for those places that resisted the official policies of the Great Leap Forward, but seems to be the rule. On top of that, Chinese researchers have been able to find personal memoirs from victims as well as survivors, which were obviously written to counteract the repression of memories related to the Great Famine. At the central level, the state council sent out investigation teams to visit places that were reported to have been hit more severely by the famine. These teams wrote meticulous reports about what they had encountered in the villages, and these reports are – we have been told – still in the archives. As Mao Zedong had brutally suppressed any kind of resistance inside the party leadership against his Great Leap strategy those whose opinions had been suppressed used the state council under Zhou Enlai to collect the materials necessary to show that they were right. One of the reasons why they did not dare to pull out these materials at an earlier date was the fact that as part of Mao Zedong's strategy for inner party struggle he made the whole party

leadership (with only insignificant exceptions) an accomplice in his suppression of Peng Dehuai as the most outspoken critic of the Great Leap.²⁹ Deng Xiaoping, the later architect of the reform policies in the PRC, was among them, and the re-emergence of memories related to the Great Famine has clearly gained momentum after his death in 1997.

Among the many reasons why inner party resistance against the Great Leap was so strong there are two that seem to stand out as extraordinarily important. With the policy of enforced collectivization harming the clan, family and village structures,³⁰ the CCP leadership overcharged the social pillow on which it had supposedly relied since mobilizing the peasantry on its road to power. This time the problem was not only a problem of ideology, but also a problem of real life, if not survival. However, to guarantee a better life for the mass of the population was the central argument with the help of which the CCP had gained support from the peasant population and from intellectuals in the cities. This is what Hu Sheng articulates when he refers to the hope of supplying the masses with a better life within the shortest possible period of time, a hope that had been disappointed by the Great Famine.³¹ With the Great Leap Forward Mao Zedong hit a terrible blow at both the social pillow and the political and moral legitimacy for the CCP's claim to power, and thus jeopardized the process of stabilizing the newly established regime. Because the Great Leap and the Great Famine hit the very heart of the regime's legitimacy, they provoked major resistance inside the party. But once Mao Zedong had muzzled his opponents and thus overcome the crisis it was clear to all insiders that for years to come the Great Famine could not be talked about. To come back to Jan Assmann's terminology, the collective memory of the Great Famine stayed alive without being elevated to the level of communicative memory. In this context, the highly fragmented character of Chinese society, the distance between the urban and the rural population and the fact that the state and the CCP propaganda did not reach down to the very grass roots level of society in the countryside³² all helped keep the memory alive, even though the Great Famine was officially taboo and not to be talked of. But at the same

²⁹ Teiwes and Sun 1999.

³⁰ Meisner 1999: 414-425.

³¹ Hu Sheng 1991, 369.

³² Scott 1977, Shue 1988.

time, inner party resistance against the Great Leap had only been silenced, not eradicated. That is why the records on the Great Famine are in the archives, and that is why the problem of the Great Famine would eventually come back to the surface of inner party debate.

Mao Zedong's death in 1976 and the subsequent radical break with the CCP's former policies laid the foundation for the unresolved debate on the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine to re-emerge. That is the reason why we find a new interpretation of the relationship between the Great Leap and economic difficulties in the 1981 Resolution, and that is why Hu Sheng quite openly talked about the dimensions of what had happened between 1959 and 1961. Even though in the late nineteen seventies and early nineteen eighties, as a result of public demand, many debates went on in mainland China about the mistakes the CCP had made in the past, the discussion on the Great Leap was not instigated by grass roots level needs. It was a topic of inner party struggle with major relevance for the party leadership, the majority of which had participated in following Mao Zedong's deathly strategy. At that time, the Cultural Revolution was – and still is – the focus of public outrage, not the Great Leap. The fact that academics, intellectuals and members of the CCP bureaucracy had been the main victims during the Cultural Revolution and that those who had survived among the victims had gradually regained their status in society as a consequence of the radical policy change on the side of the CCP leadership in 1976 might be a plausible explanation for this phenomenon, especially if seen against the fact that most victims of the Great Famine had been peasants. But by looking at the further development of the discussion on the Great Leap and the Great Famine in mainland China, we will see that this was not the only reason. The Great Famine entered the state of communicative memory not in the wake of a political discussion, but as a consequence of an urge to reinvestigate the nature of Chinese culture among Chinese intellectuals.

Trauma, memory and culture

While discussions on the nature of Chinese culture have been widespread for quite a number of years and related to quite a number of topics, it took the

courage of one author to integrate the question of the Great Famine into this debate. This step was finally taken by Zhi Liang (i.e. Wang Zhiliang 王智量) in his novel “A starving mountain village (*Ji'e de shancun*)” published by Lijiang Publishing House in Guilin in 1994. The author of the novel, born in 1928, has been a professor at Huadong Shifan Daxue [Huadong Normal University] in Shanghai since 1978. After graduation from Peking University in 1952, he soon became a well-known translator of Russian literature, but was sent to the countryside during the three difficult years as a consequence of being labeled a “rightist” in 1958. He wrote the novel on the basis of experiences he gained at several different places in the countryside, especially in Gansu.³³

The novel tells the story of a Chinese village at the end of the fifties where the lack of food and water caused starvation, and where those who do not starve fall into total lethargy. More than 100 people have already died from hunger in the village, others flee to the cities to beg for food. No “collective” activities are possible anymore, everybody is busy trying to find something to eat and live for the next day to come. People climb the hills to search for eatable herbs in the forest. They rush off to wait for a train hoping that the passengers might throw something eatable out of the windows. They desperately long for rain not only because they are running out of drinkable water, but also because they want to wash their bodies and at least some of their clothes. Only some of the cadres still have so much to eat that they have the strength to show some kind of activity and the power to add to the sufferings of their “underlings” by forcing them into politically motivated, yet unreasonable actions or by harassing them sexually.

The story is written from an intellectual's point of view. The intellectual is not only shocked to see people starve, but also at the way sexuality becomes the focus of everybody's attention. Coming from the train station the first encounter he recalls when entering the village is meeting a woman offering her “services” for a “*mantou* 饅頭 (dumpling)”. After a while, he learns that this behavior is not at all unusual as he is confronted with gossip related to sex everywhere. Hunger seems to push people to an extreme where they are brutally robbed off their humanness and integrity by being forced into acts harming their sense of dignity.

³³ Yu Hua 1996.

Judging from the postscript of the novel, the author must have first had difficulties in finding a publishing house willing to take the risk of publishing his novel. The reason was – as the editor of the book points out in his postscript – that it would be difficult to sell the book because the market would not accept it.³⁴ If this argument is not a cover for the fear of coming across political problems, it says that publishing houses assumed people would prefer to forget their sufferings and younger people would not be interested in knowing about the hardships the generation of their parents had gone through. When the Lijiang Publishing House was finally convinced to bring the book out, it soon had to go into its second and third edition because of so many people showing an interest in reading the novel. Quite obviously, the market has accepted the book. The author even told me in a personal interview that several people had approached him interested in making a film out of it and that by 1999 more than 200,000 copies had been sold. Chinese from all over the world with personal memories of the famine wrote comments and reviews on the book. Xuan Shujing writes: “The three years of famine have always been buried alive in the tombs of the forgetfulness of history. By stepping out and writing this novel, Wang Zhiliang, himself a well-known scholar and translator, is excavating these tombs of forgetfulness and tracing back the memories of our State and our nation, even though they are difficult memories. There is no way to take memory away from people, and this is especially true for a whole nation.”³⁵ And Zhong Yi writes: “In fact, the three difficult years are for all Chinese who have not been blinded by the time the most cruel page [in history]. We do not have the right to forget the past, and we should not forget the past!”³⁶

For the author writing this book amounts to fulfilling an important task in the process of rebuilding Chinese culture. “When you pick up this book to read it, you will immediately feel the true feelings expressed by Wang Zhiliang and held by all of those who have helped bringing this book out. And at the same time you will realize that it was not in vain that we dedicated all of our strength to this book because the kind of work we have done is extremely meaningful

³⁴ Zhang Sheng 1994: 380.

³⁵ Xuan Shujing 1995.

³⁶ Zhong Yi 1995.

cultural work.”³⁷ This is how he draws the line between the political debate about who is responsible for what from a more far-reaching cultural debate related to the Great Famine and the lessons to learn from it. Zhi Liang does not write the story of wise people willing to live and decided to survive. Neither does he write the story of people fighting against a party forcing them with its wrong policy into unbearable sufferings. He writes the story of people taking care only of themselves and their own survival. Hunger and lust seem to drive these people into depriving themselves of any human qualities, while at the same time they can be full of humanity, conscious of their guilt and depressed by their own meanness. Their fight for survival is anything but heroic. It is a fight that drives men to the extreme where no difference between man and animal is left to be seen. In other words: The way Zhi Liang treats the problem is not to incite action against the party. Rather, it is to encourage the party to remember the sufferings of the people so as to avoid anything like this to happen again.

It is in this sense that Zhi Liang refers to his undertaking in the introductory remarks to his novel. He says: “Because, even though what Zhi Liang wrote down has long since become history and even though today fresh flowers are blooming on Chinese soil, history is to my mind still a truthful mirror and a beacon hanging over our head with its light never extinguishing. The more it shines onto your face, the clearer it will be. In times when we are moving forward in big steps it will help us to choose the right path.”³⁸ The author is here referring to the traditional understanding of why history has to be written. History is the mirror for the ruler to learn to avoid mistakes and ruling for the benefit of the people. And he is, of course, saying that he hopes a famine like the one he is writing about will never occur again if only people can remember the kind of suffering it has brought to those directly affected.

If Zhi Liang uses the medium of literature to communicate his idea to the party he uses the force of communicative memory to remind the party of its responsibility. His account of the “three difficult years” is not counter-present-day in the sense of being subversive and inciting. It is counter-present-day by perpetuating the tradition of intellectual censorship and reminding the rulers of their own principles. That is why Zhi Liang refers to history as a mirror, and by

³⁷ Zhi Liang 1994: 382.

³⁸ Zhi Liang 1994: Introductory remarks.

conveying this idea to his readers he lends his support to those trying to force the party to work up to its own commitments.

But at the same time Zhi Liang is reminding the Party of its own principles, he reminds his readers and those who survived the Great Famine of their loss of self-esteem and dignity. By writing the story of the starving village through the eyes of a “sent down” intellectual who is supposed to be educated by the peasant masses he reveals his compassion for the suffering of the peasants as well as his disappointment resulting from the lack of civilization to be found among the peasants. He is compassionate when – for example – he comes to talk about them having to take the decision about which member of the family has to die next. But he does not hide his astonishment – if not to say disgust – when he writes about sexual intercourse being the only kind of activity people are able and willing to pursue. Both topics are, of course, related to each other, if seen on a level that he as a story writer only hints at without giving further explanation: that the people were horrified by the idea of having to face the extermination of a whole family, a clan or even a village. As ancestor worship is still deeply rooted in the Chinese countryside, this is the trauma.

While [Wang] Zhiliang still seems to be the first and only author to directly present from an eyewitness’ perspective an account of the Great Famine in his literature, members of the younger generation such as the prominent writers Yu Hua and Mo Yan indirectly add to our understanding of memory and trauma in the context of culture. Their stories do not read as an appeal to the rulers to better take care of the people. They refer to the people in a very direct manner that sees their actions and reactions in the context of Chinese culture. By this, they seem to be able to escape from the tradition of intellectuals limiting themselves to censoring the rulers and to strive to establish for themselves an avant-garde position beyond the norms set by tradition.

Yu Hua’s story “Life” (*Huozhe*)³⁹ describes 20th century China as a country going through one catastrophe after the other. And while it does not give the answer to why this is so, it shows how people can survive the disaster. It shows how the hope for mere survival is the key to understanding the way the past is dealt with in China. The protagonist starts out as a gambler and ends as a loyal citizen of Communist China who despite his cooperativeness, flexibility and

³⁹ Yu Hua 1992.

opportunism loses his son and his daughter during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. With the family having lost their wealth and power the only hope that is left are the children and their better future. Even though they die, the survival of the family seems to be guaranteed by the birth of the grandchild that eventually will also die before growing to become an adult. In all cases, the deaths of the children are no “logical” consequences of the political movement in the context of which they take place. They are meaningless and contingent, yet at the same time a consequence of the mismanagement caused by the climate of a political campaign. The protagonists, however, do not ask for explanations. They mourn the dead and go on to live.

Yu Hua tries to offer an explanation for his protagonist’s wish to conform with the regime by showing him surviving from a disastrous battle during the “War of Liberation” (1945-1949) and having him allude to this “miracle” time and again as bestowing him with the courage to live. The protagonist is said to have escaped death by convincing himself of the necessity to live in the face of uncountable dead bodies lying around him.

The intensity with which Yu Hua has his narrator tell the story is a reflection of the intensity of suffering. But it is the writer who through his narrator identifies the events as being of traumatic character, not the protagonist of the story. Yu Hua confronts us with the paradox that he as a non-participant storyteller tells the story of a catastrophe to his readers, which the direct participants do not speak of. It is not the participants directly confronted with traumatic experiences asking for solidarity and explanation. It is the non-participant younger generation standing in front of them and wondering how they could go through all this without asking.

Literature of this kind defines itself as a means to prevent amnesia.⁴⁰ And if we follow Yu Hua’s explanation, the main reason why literature has to take over the task of fighting amnesia is that people tend to forget once they have survived the catastrophe because they survived the catastrophe. Yu Hua’s explanation is not based on the event as being traumatic and therefore generating a certain memory pattern that includes forgetting or at least not articulating the remembrance of the catastrophe. Yu Hua finds the explanation for his protagonists’ behavior by putting it into the context of ancestor

⁴⁰ For a comparative view on European literature see Assmann 1999, Weigel 1999.

worship in which the death of an individual is – though deplorable – seen as one link in the history of a clan or a family that has existed for generations. As long as the survival of the family is guaranteed, as long as the lineage has not been broken, the loss of an individual – even if induced by maltreatment, accident or manmade disaster – is tolerable. That means in our context: The trauma is there as long as the catastrophe is going on; as soon as it comes to an end, for those who survive, the trauma stops being a trauma. The mechanism responsible for this way of dealing with the trauma is quite different from what we have been discussing in the European or German context. The de-traumatization of the trauma is not the consequence of integrating it into the historical narrative and thus explaining the unexplainable. The de-traumatization of the trauma is the consequence of surviving the catastrophe. It does not need explanation.

Yu Hua is bewildered by his own explanation. His world is not the world of Chinese villages where ancestor worship is still part of everyday life, his world is not the world in which Chinese are proud of themselves at being able to go through the worst of suffering (*chi ku* 吃苦). That is why he deconstructs the culture of hardship and suffering by having the grandchild born at the expense of his mother's death die at the end of his novel (while the film version leaves the spectator with the illusion that this child might go on to live in a better world!!). It seems as if for him the Chinese people have had to pay such a high death toll for moving onward on the road towards modernity because of its peculiar way of treating the memory of crises and catastrophes.

As in Yu Hua's novel we find extreme suffering described in Mo Yan's story of the *Hong Gaoliang* 紅高粱 clan.⁴¹ Mo Yan's depiction, however, goes a bit further than Yu Hua's novel; there is no difference between victims and victimizers. Rural society is a society full of violence and brutality, a society of revenge and murder. During the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945) the hatred is directed against the Japanese invaders, but nevertheless, rival troops or villagers from other places are fought against with just as much brutality and vigor. This fight's winners are next time's losers, and thus victims and victimizers change sides time and again. At the climax of their fights, the *Hong Gaoliang* clan is attacked and chased through the village by wild and hungry

⁴¹ Mo Yan 1988.

dogs. Only very few survive, but would never refrain from going on with their battle.

Mo Yan's story is of extreme intensity; even when put into words, the brutality described is nearly intolerable. The story is told by a young boy, the offspring of a survivor whose life as a young boy had been in constant danger during the war against Japan. The narrator is the son of the son who learns to kill and survive at a very early age. Nothing of all that is happening around him can have meaning to him. No explanation could be good enough to explain why.

Both Mo Yan and Yu Hua discuss trauma and disaster in terms of repetition. For both of them the disaster is not limited to an individual event but consists of its repeated reoccurrence. This could lead us to yet another layer of explanation, which Sigmund Freud referred to when discussing trauma in his famous book *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*.⁴² For him, experiencing trauma is an integral part of Jewish history, the repetitiveness of the traumatic experience part of Jewish identity. In other words, trauma as the inexplicable link in the history of an individual, a group, a people or a nation stays inexplicable, but is tolerable in its repetitiveness. The fact that it happens time and again is the explanation that replaces further investigation into why and when. If Freud is right, this means that in the Jewish case trauma can be integrated into the historical narrative and can become part of the cultural memory because of its repetitive character and despite its inexplicability. That is how traumatic experiences do not fall into forgetfulness, but, on the contrary, are consciously remembered without being robbed of their meaninglessness.

If we follow Yu Hua and Mo Yan, the Chinese case is different from the Jewish. During the course of the 20th century the Chinese people have learned to survive multiple wars, crisis and disasters and by surviving these catastrophes have preferred to forget. For Yu Hua forgetting is the logical consequence of survival and therefore does not need any further explanation. For Mo Yan, the inexplicable is being left as it is without vesting an effort to overcome the trauma by integrating it into the historical narrative. The repetitiveness of the traumatic experience is in the Chinese case part of the cultural heritage, it is not part of history. From analyzing the case of the Great Famine, we might add

⁴² Freud 1979.

to Yu Hua and Mo Yan's explanation that the tendency to forget seems to be as well developed as the conscious effort to preserve the records of what happened in the past. In Mo Yan's novel it is the coexistence of both forgetting and keeping the record that is the basis for incessant mutual revenge. Mo Yan's writes his novel as part of a counter-narrative to what party historiography tells its readers about the glorious revolution. His is the story of unending, meaningless violence: a traumatic experience *par excellence*.

This way of telling the story means turning official party historiography upside down. And the list of the ten most important events, which I mentioned at the very beginning of my paper, somehow reflects that what has been articulated on the level of communicative memory by authors like Yu Hua and Mo Yan has exerted at least some influence. Twentieth century Chinese history no longer is the narrative of a victorious revolution leading the Chinese people, guided by a correct ideology and political strategy as bundled in what is called Mao Zedong Thought (*Mao Zedong sixiang* 毛澤東思想), into a brighter future.⁴³ At least in Mo Yan's eyes China's recent history is characterized by the unending attempt for change by struggle, an attempt that, alas, has not yet achieved any success big enough to outweigh the enormous losses that it has caused. The symbol he creates in order to give his readers a hint at what kind of motor could drive the peasants into this unending fight is the liquor the *Hong Gaoliang* clan is known for producing. It derives its special taste from being a mixture of alcohol, urine and blood. His explanation differs quite strongly from what Yu Hua is telling us: for him it is dreaming of a victorious revolution that has mislead the Chinese people into the catastrophes of 20th century Chinese history, for Yu Hua it is the inability to escape from one's own traditions. In deconstructing the official historical narrative both authors add to the process of rewriting Chinese history so as to include, deplore and overcome the many catastrophes and traumata arising from them. This does not mean that for them history is trauma *per se*. Like Liu Zaifu and Li Zehou, who demand a farewell from revolution⁴⁴ they think that the Chinese people have to go through a process of getting rid of their dreams and habits in order to find reachable aims that do not lead them into disaster again. The list of the ten most important events in 20th century Chinese history reflects this mood of

⁴³ Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 1984, 1988.

⁴⁴ Li Zehou 1995.

urging self-criticism as well as the optimism of being able to learn from the past and strive for a better future. The fact that the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward including the Great Famine rank first and second on the list shows: the farewell from revolution is already taking place. Chances are that the Great Leap Forward including its catastrophic aftermath in the form of the Great Famine will eventually become part of the cultural memory in China.

Conclusion

As the above presented inquiry into different aspects of trauma and memory in the context of the Great Famine from 1959 to 1961 has shown, even in a highly politicized environment like the PRC politics in its capacity to either suppress or instigate public debate about individual or collective memories is not the only, probably not even the most important factor in making individual remembrances about events of traumatic dimensions develop to enter the realm of communicative and possibly cultural memory. Besides psychological factors complicating communication about traumatic experiences cultural particularities have to be taken into account in order to be able to answer the question why the Great Famine could have been the subject of a taboo for such a long time and why it eventually re-emerged at the surface of public debate. And because the Great Famine, as part of the Great Leap Forward, had been a topic of inner party debate at the time it took place the political factor has to be seen as both instrumental in this taboo and also in instigating public debate on the estimated 35 million victims of what is called the greatest famine in world history.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Courtois et al. 1997: 537.

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Appendix: Results from a 1999 poll on the ten most important events of 20th century Chinese history (according to Luo Bing 2000)

Position 1: The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)

Position 2: The Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine (1959-1961)

Position 3: The Revolution of 1911

Position 4: The Founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949

Position 5: The Death of President Liu Shaoqi as a Consequence of Ill-treatment during the Cultural Revolution on November 12, 1969

Position 6: The Plain Crash of the Designated Mao Successor Lin Biao on September 13, 1971

Position 7: The Successful Ignition of the Chinese Atomic Bomb on October 16, 1964

Position 8: The Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945)

Position 9: The Resolution of the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP on Reform and Opening (December 1978)

Position 10: Demonstrations Against the "Gang of Four" on Tian-An-Men-Square in April 1976