

# China's Cover-Up

## When Communists Rewrite History

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The Chinese Communist leader [Mao Zedong's](#) “permanent revolution” destroyed tens of millions of lives. From the communist victory in 1949 in the Chinese Civil War, through the upheaval, famine, and bloodletting of the Great Leap Forward and the [Cultural Revolution](#), until Mao's death in 1976,

the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) set segments of Chinese society against one another in successive spasms of violent class warfare. As wave after wave of savagery swept China, millions were killed and millions more sent off to “reform through labor” and ruination. Mao had expected this level of brutality. As he once declared: “A revolution is neither a dinner party, nor writing an essay, painting a picture, or doing embroidery. It cannot be so refined, so leisurely, gentle, temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of

violence by which one class overthrows another.

Today, even experts on Chinese history find it difficult to keep track of all the lethal “mass movements” that shaped Mao’s revolution and which the party invariably extolled with various slogans. Mao launched campaigns to “exterminate landlords” after the Communists came to power in 1949; to “suppress counterrevolutionaries” in the early 1950s; to purge “rightists” in the late 1950s; to overthrow “capitalist roaders” during the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s; and to “rectify” young people’s thinking by shipping them off to

China's poorest rural areas during the Down to the Countryside Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The ideological rhetoric obscured the extremism of these official actions, through which the party permitted the persecution and even the liquidation of myriad varieties of "counterrevolutionary elements." One of Mao's most notable sayings was "the party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the party." Long after his death, his successors carried on in that tradition, most visibly during the Tiananmen Square massacre and the ensuing

crackdown that the CCP carried out in response to peaceful protests in 1989, which led to untold numbers of dead and wounded.

Today, China is enjoying a period of relative stability. The party promotes a vision of a “harmonious society” instead of class struggle and extols comfortable prosperity over cathartic violence.

Someone unfamiliar with the country might be forgiven for assuming that it had reckoned with its recent past and found a way to heal its wounds and move on.

Far from it. In fact, a visitor wandering the streets of any Chinese city today will

find no plaques consecrating the sites of mass arrests, no statues dedicated to the victims of persecution, no monuments erected to honor those who perished after being designated “class enemies.” Despite all the anguish and death the CCP has caused, it has never issued any official admission of guilt, much less allowed any memorialization of its victims. And because any mea culpa would risk undermining the party’s legitimacy and its right to rule unilaterally, nothing of the sort is likely to occur so long as the CCP remains in power.

## **(Re)written by the victors**

Despite its truly impressive success in shepherding China's economic development and rise to global power, the party remains insecure and thin-skinned, perhaps because its leaders are still so painfully aware of the party's historical liabilities. The Central Propaganda Department—which, along with myriad other state organs, is tasked with censoring the media and making sure that all educational materials toe the party's line—has sealed off entire areas of China's past. Serious consequences flow from the manipulation of something as fundamental to a country's identity as

its historical DNA. Maintaining a “correct” version of history not only requires totalitarian controls but also denies Chinese the possibility of exploring, debating, understanding, and coming to terms with the moral significance of what has been done to them and what they have been induced to do to themselves and one another. The task of “correcting” or erasing entire segments of a country’s past is costly and exhausting. An example of the lengths to which propaganda officials go has recently been brought to light by Glenn Tiffert, a China scholar at the University of Michigan. Through dogged

sleuthing, he discovered that two digital archives—the China National Knowledge Infrastructure, which is connected to Tsinghua University, and the National Social Sciences Database, which is sponsored by the Chinese government—were missing the same group of 63 articles published between 1956 and 1958 by two Chinese-language academic law journals. These articles had long been available via both archives, only to inexplicably disappear. (Tiffert is not sure when the erasure occurred.) His study revealed that certain scholars, especially those who had been influenced by the West and had run afoul

of the party's ever-changing political lines, almost always had their articles deleted. At the same time, certain topics, such as “the transcendence of law over politics and class, the presumption of innocence, and the heritability of law,” and certain terminology, such as the phrases “rule of law” and “rightist elements,” also seemed to serve as cause for removal. Tellingly, there was a striking uniformity in the writers and topics that were excised.

Except for a few institutions abroad that maintain hard-copy collections of such journals, those articles are now unavailable to Chinese citizens and to

the world. Such manipulation is made all the more pernicious owing to the fact that “even sound research practice may offer no defense,” as Tiffert points out. “Perversely, the more faithful scholars are to their censored sources, the better they may unwittingly promote the biases and agendas of the censors, and lend those the independent authority of their professional reputations.”

As the astrophysicist and dissident Chinese intellectual Fang Lizhi wrote in 1990 of such state-sponsored assaults on China’s historical memory:

*[The policy’s] aim is to force the whole of society to forget its history,*

*and especially the true history of the Chinese Communist party itself. . . . In an effort to coerce all of society into a continuing forgetfulness, the policy requires that any detail of history that is not in the interests of the Chinese Communists cannot be expressed in any speech, book, document, or other medium.*

Fang wrote those words just after the Tiananmen Square massacre, when he was trapped in the U.S. embassy and the CCP was undertaking one of its most audacious efforts at historical erasure—namely, wiping away all traces of the crimes it had just committed from archives, books, and electronic media.

So successful was this censorship that, in 2004, the Chinese dissident and future Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo lamented that even though “the people of Mainland China have suffered some unimaginable catastrophes after the Communist accession to power, . . . the post-Tiananmen generation has no deep impression of them and lacks firsthand experience of police state oppression.” Ten years later, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei put it more bluntly: “Because there is no discussion of these events, Chinese still have little understanding of their consequences. Censorship has in effect neutered society, transforming it

into a damaged, irrational, and purposeless creature.”

In this way, China has become “the People’s Republic of Amnesia,” in the words of Louisa Lim, a former BBC and NPR correspondent in Beijing, who used that phrase as the title of her 2014 book. As she wrote, “A single act of public remembrance might expose the frailty of the state’s carefully constructed edifice of accepted history, scaffolded in place over a generation and kept aloft by a brittle structure of strict censorship, blatant falsehood and willful forgetting.”

## **The stones speak**

But is it really better for societies or communities to collectively remember traumatic periods of their histories?

Might not such retrospection reopen old wounds and revive old, murderous struggles? (That is what the writer David Rieff argues in his recent book *In Praise of Forgetting*.) The CCP would like the people it rules—and the rest of the world—to embrace such logic and accept that evasion of the brutal truth about the past is the best route to healing.

An entirely different school of thought grew out of the German experience of facing up to the crimes of the Nazis. The

man who devised the road map for the expiation of German guilt was the philosopher and psychoanalyst Karl Jaspers, who in 1945 gave a series of influential lectures at the University of Heidelberg that were later collected in a book titled *The Question of German Guilt*. Even though what happened under Adolf Hitler precipitated something “like a transmutation of our being,” said Jaspers, Germans were still “collectively liable.” All of those “who knew, or could know”—including those “conveniently closing their eyes to events or permitting themselves to be intoxicated, seduced, or bought with personal advantage, or

obeying from fear”—shared responsibility. The “eagerness to obey” and the “unconditionality of blind nationalism,” he declared, constituted “moral guilt.” Human beings are, said Jaspers, responsible “for every delusion to which we succumb.” He put his faith in healing through “the cultivation of truth” and “making amends,” a process he believed had to be completely free from any state-sponsored propaganda or manipulation.



*A man stands in front of a column of army tanks on Changan Avenue east of Tiananmen Square in Beijing, June 1989.*



*Security cameras in front of the giant portrait of former Chinese Chairman Mao Zedong in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, November 2012.*

“There can be no questions that might not be raised,” he declared, “nothing to be fondly taken for granted, no sentimental and no practical lie that would have to be guarded or that would be untouchable.” In Jaspers’ view, only through historical awareness could Germans ever come to terms with their past and restore themselves to a semblance of moral and societal health. Jaspers’ approach owed a great deal to psychoanalytic theory and the work of Sigmund Freud. For Freud,

understanding a patient's past was like "excavating a buried city," as he wrote in 1895. Indeed, he was fond of quoting the Latin expression *saxa loquuntur*: "The stones speak." Such mental archaeology was important to Freud because he believed that a repressed past inevitably infected the present and the future with neuroses unless given a conscious voice to help fill in what he called "the gaps in memory." In this sense, history and memory were Freud's allies and forgetting was his enemy.

For Mao, the historical record served chiefly to fortify his own reductive theories.

Mao, too, was fascinated by history, but he took a far more utilitarian view of it: for him, the historical record served chiefly to fortify his own reductive theories. Independent historians engaging in free-form explorations of the past represented a profound threat, and during Mao's reign, many of them were dismissed from their official positions, charged as "counterrevolutionaries," sent off for "thought reform" at labor camps, and in all too many cases persecuted to death.

## **Dangerous history**

Given his own neo-Maoist predilections, it is hardly surprising that Chinese President Xi Jinping also views independent scholars as dangerous progenitors of what Chinese state media have termed “historical nihilism.” In 2015, the *People’s Liberation Army Daily* warned that China “must be [on] guard” against such malefactors because they are now “spreading from the academic realm into online culture,” where “capricious ideas are warping historical thoughts and leading discourse astray.”

Tiffert spells out what it means when Chinese historians run afoul of party censors. They confront, he writes, “a sliding scale of penalties, including harassment by the authorities, closure of publications and online accounts, humiliating investigations into personal affairs, business activities and tax status, and ultimately unemployment, eviction, and criminal prosecution.” Last year, Chinese civil law was even amended to punish “those who infringe upon the name, likeness, reputation, or honor of a hero, martyr, and so forth, harming the societal public interest,” writes Tiffert, which explains why “previously

outspoken intellectuals and activists are going silent.”

Tiffert also reports that “the Chinese government is leveraging technology to quietly export its domestic censorship regime abroad . . . , by manipulating how observers everywhere comprehend its past, present, and future.” Indeed, last summer, Beijing hectored Cambridge University Press into sanitizing the digital archive of *The China Quarterly*, an important English-language academic journal, by removing over 300 articles the CCP found objectionable from its Chinese search function. (The publisher reversed its decision days after a number

of news outlets reported on its initial capitulation.) Then, last November, Springer Nature, the publisher of such titles as *Nature* and *Scientific American*, eliminated from its Chinese websites a large number of articles that included politically sensitive references—more than 1,000 articles in all, according to the *Financial Times*.

China's leaders seem to believe they can escape the party's compromised history without penalty, at least in the short run—and they might be right. After all, China's economic progress and emergence as a significant global power do not appear to have been impeded, so

far. The CCP is wagering that it can undo, or at least dodge, the long-term damage it has inflicted on the Chinese people by simply erasing history.

But hiding the crimes of the past sits uneasily alongside the CCP tenet that there is no such thing as “universal values,” which are invariably associated with democracy and human rights and which the party casts as something foisted on China by the West as a way to undermine China’s authoritarian one-party system. According to this view, human beings have no common bias against such things as persecution, forced confession, torture, and violent

repression; no basic shared yearning for liberty or for freedom of expression, assembly, and religion; and no desire to live in a world where wrongs can ultimately be righted.

If that were true, however, the party would have no reason to fear an honest accounting of the past. After all, if universal values do not exist, then Mao's attacks on his critics and enemies do not represent grave transgressions. And yet the CCP goes to great lengths to hide the truth about those deeds—a contradiction that suggests something like a guilty conscience, or at least embarrassment at being exposed. If that is the case, then

perhaps some future Chinese regime will have to find a way to acknowledge and even come to terms with the full dimensions of what the CCP has done to China—the bad along with the good. For the foreseeable future, however, that seems unlikely.

In the wake of China's Democracy Wall Movement of 1978–79, during which thousands of Beijingers gathered at an unprepossessing brick wall to hang political posters, deliver speeches, and hold political debates, Chinese writers began examining their country's decades of political oppression. This writing came to be known as “investigative

reportage” and “scar literature.” But such inquiries ended after 1989, and ever since Xi took office, in 2012, an ever-heavier shroud of censorship has cast China into an increasingly deep state of historical darkness. A recent study by the China Media Project, at the University of Hong Kong, searched 140 mainland Chinese publications for articles about the Cultural Revolution, a ten-year period during which countless millions of middle-class Chinese, intellectuals, and Western-trained professionals were persecuted and killed for having “bad class backgrounds.” The researchers found only three articles that dared delve

into that decade in any detail. For publications to cover the subject more thoroughly “would mean running a foolish risk,” wrote the authors of the project’s report.

And even if such work were someday again welcomed in China, its impact might be less than dramatic, because so much has been suppressed and repressed. In the words of the dissident Liu: “Eyes kept too long in the darkness do not easily adapt to dazzling sunlight when it suddenly pours through a window.”