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China’s Brave Underground Journal

Ian Johnson
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Remembrance
an unofficial journal published in Tiantongyuan, China
available at prchistory.org/remembrance

Magnum Photos

Young pioneers on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, 1965; photographs by Marc Riboud, whose exhibition ‘Witness at a Crossroads: Photographer Marc Riboud in Asia’ is at the Rubin Museum of Art, New York City, until March 23, 2015

On the last stretch of flatlands north of Beijing, just before the Mongolian

foothills, lies the satellite city of Tiantongyuan. Built during the euphoric run-up to the 2008 Olympics, it was designed as a modern, Hong Kong–style housing district of over 400,000 people, with plentiful shopping and a subway line into Beijing. But it was a rushed job, and planners neglected to put in parks, open spaces, or anything for the public other than roads, which were quickly choked with cars. Construction was pell-mell, and the area has aged quickly, its towers crumbling and cracking.

This rootless suburb is home to *Remembrance*, an underground journal that deals with one of China's most sensitive issues: its history. E-mailed to subscribers as a seventy- to ninety-page PDF every other week, *Remembrance*'s articles and first-person accounts are helping to recover memories that the Communist Party would prefer remained lost. *Remembrance* has no listed address, let alone bustling editorial offices. But if it has a home, it is here, in one of Tiantongyuan's concrete apartments, a dark, ground-floor unit lined with bookcases and stacked with boxes of banned books—a fittingly anonymous home for a publication that officially doesn't exist.

Remembrance is part of the rise of unofficial memory in China, a trend that resembles the appearance in the Soviet Union during the 1980s of groups like Memorial, a historical research society that helped undermine the regime by uncovering its troubled past. Today's China is more robust than the Gorbachev-era Soviet Union, but memory is still escaping the censor's grasp, posing challenges to a regime for which history represents legitimacy. The government still controls official history through textbooks, museums, movies, and the media. But memory is more private, and setting it down on paper can be presented as a personal enterprise, even when the outcome is highly political.

Besides *Remembrance*, China has roughly half a dozen other samizdat publications that explore the past through accounts of personal experience, including *Scars of the Past* (*Wangshi Weihen*), *Annals of the Red Crag* (*Hongyan Chunqiu*), and *Yesterday* (*Zuotian*). In addition, there are a growing number of underground documentary films, including some that send students to collect oral histories in villages that suffered during the Great Leap Famine or the Cultural Revolution.

One Saturday this spring, several of *Remembrance*'s regular writers stopped by the Tiantongyuan apartment for a pot of Pu'er tea and a chat with the journal's cofounder, the retired film historian Wu Di. As they arrived, Wu leaned back in his chair and gave a running commentary on each. Among them were a computer

data specialist at a technical university ("the greatest specialist on Lin Biao!"), an editor of the Communist Party's flagship newspaper *People's Daily* ("obviously he has to keep a low profile"), and a befuddled professor who had to call Wu three times to get directions ("what an egghead—he knows everything about violence in the Cultural Revolution but doesn't know how to hail a gypsy cab").

Wu is a trim sixty-three-year-old who favors denim shirts, leather jackets, and black baseball caps. He is also a cautious man, who positions himself as a just-the-facts recorder of history. "I simply write true things," he told me, as the visitors pulled up chairs to a big wooden table, pouring themselves tea and cracking sunflower seeds. "No one says you can't sit in your own home and do a little research in history."

The group began discussing its controversial effort to encourage people to apologize for violence they committed during the Cultural Revolution. Some thought that *Remembrance* had done a good job by publishing articles and even organizing a conference, but others said they understood its critics, who claimed that the publication had taken sides in one particular case of a group of girls who had beaten to death a high school vice-principal in 1966 during the Cultural Revolution. That topic would return again and again during the course of the day —a sensitive issue that has divided intellectuals inside China and abroad. But first the group discussed potential contributors.

"One guy in our work unit, we see him in the yard walking alone each night. He published a book on June 4 [the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre] in Hong Kong called *The True Story of June 4*. After that no one dared to talk to him."

Wu smoothed over the awkward moment by announcing that he'd arranged lunch at an odd little restaurant that aims to promote traditional Chinese values. Before we left, he pulled me aside: "You might be interested in politics, but I'm not. I am just a historian."

And yet the distinction is fluid. *Remembrance* used to focus on the Cultural Revolution but over the past few years has broadened its concerns. As one contributor asked me: "When does history end?"

It's hard to overstate how politicized history has become in China, where politics and tradition give it a mythic, taboo quality. Communism itself is based on historical determinism: one of Marx's points was that the world was moving inexorably toward communism, an argument that regime-builders like Lenin and

Mao used to justify their violent rise to power. In China, each succeeding dynasty wrote its predecessor's history, and the dominant political ideology, Confucianism, is based on the concept that ideals for ruling are to be found in the past, with the virtuous ruler emulating them. Performance matters in judging governments, but mainly as an expression of history's verdict.

Shortly after taking power in 2012, the Chinese leader Xi Jinping reemphasized history's importance in a major speech. Xi is the son of Xi Zhongxun, a top Communist who helped found the regime but fell out with Mao and suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Some thought this family trauma might lead the younger Xi to take a more critical view of the Mao era, but Xi has presented himself as heir to the founding generation, including Mao. In his speech, he said that the last thirty years of reform should not be used to "negate" the first thirty years of Communist rule—in other words, you can't support China's current policy of opening to the outside world and economic development but also criticize the Mao era. Both, he said, are one and the same, two sides of a coin.

The unstated reason is that Mao isn't just China's Stalin—someone whom the Soviet Union could discard because it still had Lenin as a less tarnished founding father. For the Communist Party of China, Mao is Stalin and Lenin combined; attack Mao and his era and you attack the foundations of the Communist state. Five years after the Cultural Revolution ended with Mao's death in 1976, the Party issued a statement that condemned that era and Mao's part in it, but also ended further discussion of Mao by declaring that "his contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweigh his mistakes. His merits are primary and his errors secondary."

For decades, many independent Chinese historians have tried to dig deeper, usually by publishing their memoirs and internal documents abroad. One coalition of scholars led by Song Yongyi, a librarian at California State University, Los Angeles, published *The Chinese Cultural Revolution Database*, a monumental work with 40,000 entries, including unpublished speeches, documents, and other information.[1] Others, such as the journalist Yang Jisheng, have published revealing histories of the Great Leap Famine.[2] Many of these works have been published in Hong Kong, often through the publisher Bao Pu, who runs New Century Press. All were inspired by memory. Song was jailed for five years during the Cultural Revolution. Yang watched his father starve to death during the famine. Bao's father was a famous reformer who spent years in jail after the Tiananmen massacre.

Likewise, Wu Di's firsthand experiences led him to explore the past. In 1968, when he was seventeen, he was exiled to Inner Mongolia along with millions of youths sent to remote areas to get them out of China's cities, a move that allowed Mao to restore control after the anarchy of the early phase of the Cultural Revolution. Wu lived among the herders and horsemen of the great steppes north of Beijing. One day, several youths were accused of beating a man who had robbed them. Wu spoke out in favor of them and was immediately arrested.

He was thrown into a jail cell about twenty feet long filled with twenty men. They were accused of having organized a plot for Mongolian independence centered around the ethnic Mongolian Communist leader Ulanhu. After a month, Wu was reassigned to a cell with just two men, senior Communist Party leaders suspected of participating in the plot but distraught over their arrest. Wu was ordered to make sure the men didn't take their lives.

"At first, I was just excited to be away from the overcrowded cell and didn't care about the men," he said. "But then I began talking to them and started to learn about the Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia."

When he eventually returned to Beijing, he took a university degree, became a teacher, and explored the outside world through foreign films, which became his specialty. He published widely on the topic, including an amusing book on foreign and Chinese cinema that could be translated as *East–West: Apples and Oranges*.

Yet the memories of his youth stayed with him. He knew he had witnessed history and spent the 1980s carefully writing down what he'd heard, corroborating information with eyewitnesses. A fresh finding was the degree of ethnic hatred that underlay the violence. Official figures show that during the Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia 22,900 died and 790,000 were imprisoned, but there was no atonement and no discussion of the fact that most of the killers were Chinese or that the victims overwhelmingly were Mongolians. Wu's conclusion was that this unresolved era continues to underlie ethnic tensions in the region.

But the manuscript was unpublishable and there was no *Remembrance* to get even the gist of it published in China. It lay in Wu's desk drawer, a fading memory of the windswept Mongolian steppes.

The only way to get around Tiantongyuan is by car, so we drove to the restaurant through the bleak northern streets, ending up at one of the suburb's

luxury compounds. The houses inside were called villas but they were little more than concrete blocks, with blue-tinted windows protected by rusty bars. Out front were BMWs and Land Rovers—expensive anywhere but about double the US prices due to high tariffs. Rich people lived here, but they seemed trapped.

After winding through the subdivision for half a mile, we arrived at a small parking lot. I had expected a grand restaurant but it was a simple, prefab building with big windows. Inside, two volunteers stood behind a card table, ladling food out of two stainless steel buckets. The choice was vegetable or tofu stew, with millet porridge or steamed buns that had gone cold. It was 12:15 PM but already late for lunch by Chinese standards.

Magnum Photos

A statue of Mao, Wuhan, Hubei province, 1971

On one wall was a large portrait of Confucius above an altar table covered with fruit and flowers. Across from it were elegant Chinese bookcases, with shelves of different length and height. They were stacked with books and DVDs, free for the taking, all extolling traditional Chinese religions. One was called *Lectures on Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism*, given at the Palace of Golden Horses Hotel in Kuala Lumpur. Another was *The Hidden Truth: See Truth, Treasure Life.* The restaurant's simplicity and its free literature were signs that it was a center for

traditional values. I asked Wu who ran it.

"It's a businessman," he said. "He's doing this as a charity. It's an act of benevolence."

We listened to a DVD of a man lecturing from an enormous flat-screen television at full volume. He wore a gray collarless jacket, and stood before a backdrop of a sky and a field of cartoonishly bright colors. His topic was a Buddhist classic, but he was free-associating about death, morality, and national affairs.

"How can you tell a country's condition?" he said. "By the virtue of its leaders." Virtue, he said, means being not corrupt. If leaders are not corrupt, they are virtuous. If they are virtuous, they should be respected.

The *People's Daily* editor laughed and shrugged, as if he were listening to one of his newspaper's circular editorials. "The usual line from Chinese tradition—everyone should be respected and virtuous," he said. "But what to do if the leaders aren't virtuous? I guess you're supposed to figure it out yourself."

We ate quickly and drove back to the apartment. The men reassembled around the big wooden table to talk, but I went to a back room to chat with Dai Weiwei, one of *Remembrance's* editors and contributors. Like Wu, she is a volunteer but works at it more or less full time.

At fifty, Dai is a tall northerner, with short curly hair and a soft voice. Her parents had been senior editors at the Xinhua news agency; this meant she grew up in a housing compound with other children of the elite, which left her with an almost encyclopedic knowledge of who is married to or related to whom. She joined *Remembrance* in 2011, three years after it was founded.

"This is a chance for us to look into our own history," Dai said to me, as she perched on the corner of a sofa piled with banned books imported from Hong Kong. "*Remembrance* is ordinary people looking at history, not the government."

Wu's idea had been to found a publication to allow people like himself to publish. His own manuscript on Inner Mongolia had stayed in his desk drawer until the 1990s, when he met one of the West's foremost scholars of the Cultural Revolution, Michael Schoenhals of Lund University in Sweden, who published, in an English-language monograph series, excerpts under the pseudonym "W. Woody." Seventeen years later, in 2010, Wu published the book in Hong Kong.[3]

In 2008, he launched *Remembrance* with the Chongqing historian He Shu. In the

inaugural edition, they wrote that most research on the Cultural Revolution had been done abroad, by scholars such as Schoenhals or Harvard University's Roderick MacFarquhar. Now it was time for Chinese to look at their own history and publish their findings in China.

In 2011, the two men split amicably after Wu wanted to broaden the magazine beyond the Cultural Revolution. Wu changed a phrase in *Remembrance*'s sixteen-character mission statement from the "study of the Cultural Revolution" to the "study of culture and history." With He gone, Wu needed help and Dai volunteered. (Meanwhile, He runs his own unofficial magazine on the history of the Cultural Revolution, *Yesterday*.)

Wu and Dai's rule of thumb, however, is that history stops in 1978, which is when Deng Xiaoping ascended to power and established the current political system of economic and social liberalism, but strict political control. That means *Remembrance* avoids sensitive contemporary issues such as the 1989 Tiananmen massacre—a report on it would guarantee the editors' detention and *Remembrance*'s closure.

Still, *Remembrance* publishes articles on some of the most controversial topics in the Communist era. These include articles looking at the still-murky plot by Mao's favorite general, Lin Biao, to depose him in 1971, accounts of political campaigns, and histories of strikes in the 1950s—the supposed golden era of Communist rule when the party claims it enjoyed mass support.

I asked Dai if *Remembrance* had a *kanhao*, the government-issued registration that all periodicals must obtain to be legal. "No, but we aren't a publication," she said. "We are just a PDF newsletter that goes out to just two hundred people."

According to arcane rules that everyone accepts but whose origins no one knows, China's public security classifies e-mails to fewer than two hundred people as a private distribution list; anything more is a publication, which means censorship and oversight. So officially, *Remembrance*'s writers are just people interested in history sending out an e-mail every once in a while to interested friends. It's not their fault if *Remembrance* somehow reaches many of China's educated elite, and is avidly read and collected by researchers abroad. Forwarding is beyond Wu's control.

Outside, we could hear the men arguing. Their voices rose, until the discussion sounded almost angry; one man seemed to be shouting. The topic was the apologies made to victims of the Cultural Revolution, which had caused much

debate in China's social media in 2013 and 2014. The group could not agree whether it was a good thing or not. I prepared to go over and listen in. Dai looked up.

"They get heated, but it's a chance for a release. They teach at universities but can't teach this to their students. Think about that."

I will discuss the question of apology they were debating in the next issue.

—This is the first of two articles.

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1 *The Chinese Cultural Revolution Database*, edited and compiled by the Editorial Board of the Cultural Revolution, Song Yongyi, editor-in-chief (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong). The database can be ordered at: www.chineseupress.com/chinesepress/promotion/cultural-revolution-cd-new2006/e_revolution.htm. ↩

2 Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958–1962*, translated by Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012); see my review in these pages, November 22, 2012. ↩

3 W. Woody, *The Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia: Extracts from an Unpublished History* (Stockholm: Center for Pacific Asia Studies, 1993); *Record of the Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia: "Ethnic Separatism" and the Movement to "Weed Out Counterrevolutionaries"* (Hong Kong: Mirror Books, 2010). ↩

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