

# PRESENTING THE PAST THE POLITICS OF MEMORY IN A RURAL CHINESE VILLAGE

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## ABSTRACT

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In China, successive political upheavals have impacted directly on the attitudes and identities of citizens. This paper explores how residents of a small agricultural community in the prosperous eastern province of Zhejiang have constructed and discussed their own narratives of history—in relation to the actions and power of the Chinese state—over the course of the twentieth century. For the three generations concerned—grandparents, parents and their adult children—distinct events divide their experiences into clearly-defined local categories of ‘before’ and ‘after’. Respectively, these were: (1) land reforms following the Communist victory and establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949; (2) the adoption of the socialist market economy by the administration of Deng Xiaoping; (3) the increasing opportunities, mobility and consumerism of the last decade. A consideration of generational differences is shown to be crucial to understanding social memory as people and societies forget, remember and forge their identities.

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Keywords: censorship, China, intergenerational transmission, nation state, social memory

## *Introduction*

For many years we Communists have struggled for a cultural revolution as well as for a political and economic revolution, and our aim is to build a new society and a new state for the Chinese nation. That new society and new state will have not only a new politics and a new economy but a new culture. In other words, not only do we want to change a China that is politically oppressed and economically exploited into a China that is politically free and economically prosperous, we also want to change the China which is being kept ignorant and backward under the sway of the old culture into an enlightened and progressive China under the sway of a new culture. In short, we want to build a new China. (Mao Tse-Tung 1965: 340)

Early on in my fieldwork in the small farming community of Wangcun (Wang Village) in the prosperous eastern Chinese province of Zhejiang, I was eager to learn about local history. This initially appeared a rather difficult task, since the village itself kept no written records and ancestral temples had fallen into disuse or been destroyed as families burned their genealogical documents during the campaigns of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. After many discussions with villagers, the mother of my host family introduced me to Wang Ping, an elderly gentleman known to his friends as ‘Old Frog’ due to his somewhat amphibian appearance. In one of our first conversations about how life in

Wangcun had changed during his lifetime, I was intrigued by a statement that he made,<sup>1</sup> similar to many others that I had heard during my first weeks in the village:

Throughout the Qing dynasty [1644–1911] and the Republican era [1912–1949], peoples' lives were basically the same. During that time, the standard of living was really pitiful (...) The life of farmers was always the same: in the winter we would gather firewood, wear trousers and sleep on straw mats. Living standards were really low, really low. You really can't compare them with today.<sup>2</sup>

Reflecting on my conversations with Wang Ping and other villagers during my fieldwork and subsequent visits, I developed an interest in two aspects of their recollections. Firstly, although anyone asked could recite a long train of events during their own and their family's lives in Wangcun, people tended to speak in terms of distinct periods of 'then' and 'now'. Secondly, for each generation in the village, particular formative events in their lives would provide the bridge between these two periods. In the context of anthropological studies of the politics of social memory and the state, these are the two observations that I would like to explore in this paper.

Thankfully, anthropological studies of history and social memory are becoming so commonplace that there now exist works by various authors on the history of history in anthropology. Indeed, there is growing concern that the concepts of history and memory are in danger of swallowing all others: Johannes Fabian is among those who have warned that the 'concept of memory may become indistinguishable from either identity or culture' (1999: 51). Certainly, our appreciation of 'social memory' has grown increasingly sophisticated since the pioneering work of Maurice Halbwachs (1980 [1926], 1992) who—following Durkheim—proposed a link between the social group and collective memory which serves to establish and perpetuate solidarity and social order. Hobsbawm and Ranger, in *The Invention of Tradition* (1992), argue that historical representations may be manipulated (or, indeed, created *ex nihilo*) by sectors of society to serve or legitimate their political interests. Others—including James Scott (1985), Joanne Rappaport (1990) and, in China, Rubie Watson (1994)—have sought instead to portray memory as a site of resistance, where marginal groups establish common identity in opposition to dominant outsiders or processes of change.

Before going any further, it is perhaps worth clarifying my analytical intention by stating three things that this paper is not, and at least one thing that it is. In the material that I will present, I am interested in how farmers in Wangcun construct and situate themselves within their own narratives in relation to the actions of the Chinese state, and the structural similarities of those narratives across the generations with whom I spoke. While I recognise developments in central government policy during the period covered here, these are not my primary concern. Nor will I address issues of time-reckoning or the conceptualisation of time, however interesting these may be. Finally, I am not trying to compile an authoritative local history, but hope through examination of local narratives to understand a little better how farmers in Wangcun relate to their lived experiences and relationships with various—and often distant—political masters.

Following Halbwachs (1980: 78), it is important to recognise the distinction between 'memory' and 'history' in which 'past events read about in books and taught and learned in schools are selected, combined, and evaluated in accord with necessities and rules not imposed on the groups that had through time guarded them as a living trust. General

history starts only when tradition ends and the social memory is fading or breaking up.’ By contrast, ‘collective memory’ is preserved only in the consciousness of a particular group, and may be plural: whereas history aims for unitary and verifiable objectivity (located within the individual), ‘the continuous development of the collective memory is marked not, as is history, by clearly etched demarcations but only by irregular and uncertain boundaries’ (Halbwachs 1980: 82). Unlike history, social memory is thus constantly in flux as individuals and groups die and make way for successors with new experiences and perspectives.

In developing this group framework of social memory, I am particularly influenced by the work of sociologists Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott. Their work on generations and collective memory—drawing on the ideas of Karl Mannheim (1952)—found that their American informants in the late twentieth-century most clearly recalled personal experiences from early adulthood, particularly with respect to political events. These formative, personal experiences led to the formation of ‘cohorts’, whose ‘youthful experience of an actual event or change often focuses memories on the direct personal meaning of the experience, whereas the attribution of some larger political meaning to the event is more likely to be made by those who did not experience it at all, or at least did not experience it during their adolescence or early adulthood’ (Schuman and Scott 1989: 378). Schuman and Scott identify a specific process of group formation which helps us to explore, ‘the intersection of personal and national history that provides the most vital and remembered connection to the times that we have lived through’ (1989: 380). With this perspective in mind, I shall turn to my own work in China.

### *Three Generations of Memories*

The village of Wangcun lies on the outskirts of the city of Jinhua, in the centre of the coastal province of Zhejiang. For the majority of the village’s six-hundred-year history, local residents worked as tenant farmers for the wealthy lineages of neighbouring towns who owned the lands surrounding Wangcun. The early twentieth century—which represents the limits of living memory for today’s elderly residents—was especially difficult for the Jinhua region, which lay at the southernmost limit of Japanese expansion into the Chinese mainland during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). Wangcun stationed a garrison of Japanese soldiers, and many villagers lost relatives executed by the occupying army.

Following the expulsion of the Japanese and eventual victory of the Communists in the Chinese Civil War, villagers enthusiastically embraced their new leadership, who offered a very literal ‘liberation’ from earlier decades of political chaos and powerless serfdom. Early reforms to land tenure and retributions against former landlords met with widespread support, which gradually ebbed away as the harsh realities of life in the collectives took hold. Although villagers participated in the campaigns for industrialisation and actively destroyed ancestral genealogies during the campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s, older villagers such as Huang Jian Jun remember the destitution endured during the resulting famines:

In those days, we really had to suffer hardship. We never had enough to eat, and in the evenings we had to go back out to work night jobs. From six in the morning until nine at night, and we only got a sweet potato (...) We worked at night and didn't get any pay at all, just a sweet potato. Back then, we were starving to death!<sup>3</sup>

While many elderly villagers recall the starvation and deprivation of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution as a time of extreme hardship, retired cadre Li Shuang most vividly remembers the political chaos of the time:

Now it's according to the will of the people (...) Before it was very random: it could be you, it could be me; people were indifferent. Now, if you want to serve, people might not agree. Anyway, it's more democratic now, and that's a good thing.<sup>4</sup>

Following the death of Mao Tse-Tung in 1976 and the eventual rise to power of Deng Xiaoping, rural China began a gradual process of de-collectivisation resulting in the adoption of the Household Responsibility System in 1981. This reduced the state quotas for agricultural produce and allowed rural households to sell any surpluses on the open market. Although the implementation of central policies at the village level was not immediate,<sup>5</sup> the opportunity to diversify agricultural sidelines and produce for household profit led to greater prosperity than at any previous time in living memory. For today's parents in the village, this has massively improved material conditions and the general quality of life, as local carpenter Ma Wen Jun recalled:

When I was young, we had nothing: no telephones, no mobile 'phones. It wasn't such a long time ago that none of us—the workers—could afford these things. Nowadays it doesn't matter who you are, everyone buys them! If my wife goes to Guangzhou and I want to get in touch with her, I can just pick up the 'phone and call her. Maybe only ten years ago, that was impossible. You could call a fixed line in a hotel to contact someone, but now everything is much more convenient.<sup>6</sup>

For the middle-aged parents in the village—who were children during the political campaigns following 'Liberation'—their recollection is not of salvation or emancipation from working for landowning elites from nearby towns. Their stories are of material enrichment, or the perceived improvements in the status of women, as noted by Huang Hui Jun:

Before, all women listened to their men, but now men listen more to women (...) It used to be common for people to marry others from the same village, but nowadays less so. It seems like when I was young, everyone married someone from the same village, but now very few people do. These days, people get married from all over the country and come back, even from other provinces.<sup>7</sup>

These economic improvements—which have been the defining experience for today's middle-aged parents in Wangcun—have also impacted on rural family life, collapsing historical cycles of reciprocal labour exchange between kin and leading many families to contract out work to migrant labourers from poorer inland provinces. Wu Tong Yu, head of the wealthiest household in Wangcun today, believes that this has improved relations between villagers:

Before, you used to help me, and I used to help you. Now everyone works for themselves. In the past, if you wanted to build a house, it was always friends and family that helped, whereas today you can just contract out the work. I think that since the economic situation has improved, you actually have more friends and family than before.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the last decade has brought unparalleled opportunities and mobility for young people in Wangcun. Many now leave the village to seek urban employment in Jinhua or farther afield, although these developments present new challenges for rural families attempting to maintain close emotional ties. For young people like Gao Hai, the new promise of the cities is often tempered by experience of prejudice against people from the countryside and a lack of job security:

I think that nowadays, the climate for jobs is much better than before. If you really want to find something and you keep a level head, there are many good opportunities (...) [but] I never imagined that it could be so brutal.<sup>9</sup>

While praising the relative prosperity of the village, many young adults—such as 25-year-old Zhu Zhao Yang—express anxiety about the future as the tide of Jinhua's industrial expansion draws ever closer:

There have been many changes. Firstly, the living conditions for everyone have improved massively. Second, people have a much greater awareness of the legal institutions. Thirdly, people's ability to accept new things has really increased. But there are advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, in a very short period of time, the economy has accelerated. But on the downside, if—in the long term—the farmers don't have their land, this will have an effect on their lives. Farmers will have no guarantee of livelihoods. If we continue along this course towards industrialisation, there will be less and less land available.<sup>10</sup>

For Zhu Zhao Yang and other young people in Wangcun who did not live through the hardships of the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution, there is a stark contrast between their parents' education and life opportunities and their own. However, looking forward, these young people recognise the threat now posed to village life by the very economic policies which have delivered such an improvement in living conditions in recent years.

Drawing together the material presented in these quotations from villagers discussing their experiences and memories of local history, I would like now to return to anthropological approaches to social memory and the state.

### *The Politics of Memory in Rural China*

As Jing Jun (1996: 18) has noted in his work in northern Gansu province, China presents an acutely challenging context for studies of social memory, since:

Even today, Chinese authorities seek tight control over society's memory at several levels. At the archival level, such control takes the form of restricting access to historical documents. At the level of mass media and public education, control is exercised through censorship, political propaganda, and the careful writing and re-writing of history textbooks. At the more personal level, control relies

on intimidation and, sometimes, physical punishment of those who offer a radically different and unwelcome version of the past, particularly when it touches on the history of the Communist Party.

Although the recollections of farmers in Wangcun are situated along ‘the Chinese master narrative’ (Stafford 2000: 131), each is highly personalised and relates ‘autobiographical’ memory to formative experiences during the lives of individuals. Rather than presenting a chronological sequence of historical events, villagers selected key themes which shaped their memory of historical change: hardship during collectivisation, political developments towards local democracy, the convenience of modern technologies, changes in marriage practices, labour exchange and migration, and the opportunities and threats posed by rapid industrialisation.

Among those who share ‘autobiographical memory’ of these experiences, ‘social memories’ can define groups within communities. The identities of generational ‘cohorts’ are established through shared formative memories and discussed with regard to personal and temporally-specific experiences. In Wangcun, these social memories develop in relation to the dominant state discourse in ways which are not—in the Foucauldian sense (1977)—‘oppositional’ but, rather, selective. By selective, I do not wish to suggest that individuals can consciously choose which historical experiences will translate into enduring ‘autobiographical’ memories, any more than they can choose the times into which they are born and live through. Instead, it must be recognised both that ‘memories of important political events and social changes are structured by age (...) [and] that adolescence and early adulthood is the primary period for generational imprinting in the sense of political memories’ (Schuman and Scott 1989: 377).

It is in this sense that we can appreciate the formation of generational ‘cohorts’ in Wangcun, through their shared historical experiences of social and political change. For elderly grandparents in the village—born and growing up before the Communist victory of 1949—the servitude and deprivation of life working as tenant farmers for the rich landowning lineages of nearby market towns remains an important reference point in their attitudes to political change. Many are genuinely grateful for the elementary healthcare and education provided by the incoming Communist authorities, and the subsequent local and national progress over the last sixty years. Their children—middle-aged parents, whose own children have often left the village in pursuit of economic opportunities—have witnessed and participated in a massive improvement in the everyday quality of life for villagers in Wangcun. Emerging from the 1970s, they now enjoy the ready availability of pesticide and fertiliser for their fields, and have built new homes with the profits from sidelines established following de-collectivisation. Finally, the youngest adult generation now enjoys mobility and opportunities which would have been impossible for their parents. Their concerns are keeping pace with modern fashions, securing urban jobs and setting up their own families.

By adopting this generational approach to social memory, we can better comprehend the complex interplay of forces which shape understandings of local—and, more broadly, national—history. Unlike countries such as Guatemala and South Africa—the latter discussed vividly by Didier Fassin (2008)—there has not been a national process in China during which the difficulties and complexities of the past have been confronted and reconciliation sought. For some villagers in Wangcun, this has reinforced an enduring

sense of injustice among those who felt unfairly targeted by the campaigns of class struggle during the Maoist period. At the same time, however, villagers were themselves the local agents of these campaigns, and many actively and sincerely supported their means and goals. While we would be naïve not to recognise the capability of socialist states such as China to monopolise historical representation for explicitly political ends—and the potential, in Rubie Watson's terms (1994: 19), for 'evocative transcripts' of dissent or resistance among their populations—we must also acknowledge that those living 'with' (rather than 'under') a socialist government may share the ideals and appreciate the successes of those authorities in ways that go beyond mere acquiescence. As such, while the Chinese government maintains a powerful influence over social memory through its control over media, the internet and state education, there is not always the gulf between so-called 'official history' and the views and sentiments held by citizens that we are so often led to expect.

The Chinese case—in which a series of profound social and political changes have taken place within a particularly compressed timescale over the last three generations—may not be susceptible to universal extension, and it may be that this generational approach requires further refinement. Nonetheless, Maurice Bloch is surely right to claim that we cannot ignore, 'how people represent themselves to themselves in history because it is, to a certain extent, in terms of these representations, that they will react to revolutions, migrations or colonial conquests' (1998: 82). In the absence of written records destroyed during earlier decades—coupled to the breakdown of intergenerational transmission as increasing numbers of rural youths move to live and work in the cities, returning only for annual festivals—locating and accounting for the diffusion of social memories can present quite a challenge for the anthropologist. Rather than treating history as an eternal game of 'pass the parcel'—in which individuals, groups or societies inherit a rather homogenous and undifferentiated history, which they argue over and add to before bequeathing it to their own descendents—sensitivity to generational differences deepens our appreciation of the dynamic cycles of formation, perpetuation and erosion of social memory, without abandoning the group cohesion evident in this material from Wangcun. Ordinarily, noted Halbwachs, 'the nation is too remote from the individual for him to consider the history of his country as anything else than a very large framework with which his own history makes contact at only a few points' (1980: 77). It is hoped that the approach outlined here goes some way to positioning us better to explore the relationships between local memories and national histories.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from villagers presented in this paper are drawn from recorded conversations, transcribed into Mandarin Chinese by friends at a local university. The names of the village and its residents have been changed to protect identities. Translations into English, and any errors, are my own.

<sup>2</sup> '生活大家都一样的, 到清朝, 到民国, 当时生活水平都很低的 (...) 农民的生活, 大家都差不多的: 冬天捧个火篮, 穿就穿一条裤子, 睡就睡草席. 当时生活水平很低很低的, 和现在没法比的'.

<sup>3</sup> '那时的, 我们最吃苦头, 饭都吃不饱的, 晚上么还要去开夜工, 六点钟光景去做, 做到九点钟, 只有一个番薯 (...) 开夜工么一点报酬都没有, 就这么一个番薯, 那时候的饿死饿死啊!'

<sup>4</sup> ‘现在就是群众意识高起来了 (...) 以前是随便的, 你当就你当, 他当就他当, 无所谓. 现在说叫你当, 有人不一定同意让你当的. 总归现在呢, 更民主了, 这个是好的.’

<sup>5</sup> As Susan Greenhalgh (1993) has demonstrated with regard to the ‘one child policy’ in Shaanxi province, by the 1980s, local politicians often took a liberal interpretation of central government policies which were tragically out of touch with rural realities. Such policies, in her words, were subject to ‘peasantization’.

<sup>6</sup> ‘以前都没的, 以前又没什么手机, 没什么电话的. 也不久, 有手机有电话才十来年吧! 以前我们都买不起的, 打工的人. 现在无论谁都买了呢! 如果我老婆去广州, 如果我要联系她, 我一拎起电话就可以打到的, 以前就不能打到的, 十来年前都打不到的, 打固定电话, 打到旅馆里找人, 现在就很方便了.’

<sup>7</sup> ‘以前女的都是听男的, 现在是男的多听女的话了 (...) 以前本村结婚的比较多, 现在少了. 以前象我这个年纪的这批人都是本村的嫁给本村的. 现在是很少的, 现在是全国各地都有娶回家的, 隔了一个省都是有的.’

<sup>8</sup> ‘以前是你帮我, 我帮你. 现在都自己做自己的. 以前造房子, 都是亲戚朋友帮忙. 现在都让给承包商做了. 现在的联系多了, 现在经济条件好了, 亲戚朋友也多了.’

<sup>9</sup> ‘我觉得现在的工作环境比以前要好多了. 只要你愿意找, 把心态放平, 机遇很多 (...) 没有想像中那么残酷.’

<sup>10</sup> ‘变化很多. 一, 现在大家的生活状况都有很大的改善. 二, 大家的法制意识都强了很多. 三, 接受新事物的能力也比以前都强很多. 有好也有坏. 好的方面是, 从短期来说, 对地方经济有促进作用. 坏的方面是, 从长期来讲, 农民如果没土地, 对他们的生活是有影响的, 对农民的生活的延续没有保障. 如果按照现在这样工业化进程, 田肯定会越来越少.’

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