

AFTERWORD

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON THE POLITICS OF MEMORY IN ASIA

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Anthropological research on memory and memorial practices has proliferated in the discipline in recent years. This unprecedented ‘memory boom’ has not been without its critics, however. David Berliner (2005), for example, has argued that the study of memory in its multiple discursive forms and settings (social, national, material, cultural...) has resulted in categorical and terminological confusion. On the other hand, as the papers in this collection so aptly demonstrate, the ethnographic study of memory remains a fertile terrain for examining the high stakes involved in struggles to attain voice, presence and representation in history (Litzinger 2000: 69). For studies of memory, Michel-Rolph Trouillot once argued, must firstly attend to competing claims to history, truth, power and subjectivity. ‘What matters most,’ he wrote, ‘are the process and conditions of the production of [historical] narratives (...) [and] the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others’ (1995: 25).

Heeding Trouillot’s wise words, my approach to these papers and their ethnographic investigations that spanned eastern Asia was to think about diverse forms of statecraft and nation-building practices in relation to memory and its corollary: forgetting. Let me turn to an excerpt from Nietzsche’s mediation: *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1980 [1873]: 8–9):

Cheerfulness, good conscience, joyful action, trust in what is to come—all that depends, with the individual as with a people, on the following facts: that there is a line which divides the observable brightness from the unilluminated darkness, that we know how to forget at the right time just as well as we remember at the right time, that we feel with powerful instinct the time when we must perceive historically and when unhistorically. This is the specific principle which the reader is invited to consider: that for the health of a single individual, a people, and a culture the unhistorical and the historical are equally essential.

I cite this passage because it raises a number of key issues that the papers address here. First and foremost is what Nietzsche refers to as the historical and the unhistorical; the former is about presence (such as the presence of the past or remembrance) and the latter about its absence (forgetting). A clear set of contrasts appears to emerge here. And yet, like other binary oppositions that have been the focus of feminist and postcolonial critiques, it is perhaps more productive to think of memory and forgetting as complementary, rather than paired opposites. ‘The historical and the unhistorical are equally essential’, Nietzsche tells us (*ibid.*). In other words, they are mutually constitutive and dynamically interdependent, as Sturken (1996), Yoneyama (1999) and others have argued.

The papers in this collection show that memory is a selective process that always involves acts of forgetting (after all: how are we to remember everything?), and likewise, in order to forget, we need to engage in other remembrance practices that replace ‘forgotten’ memories. For, as Nietzsche also argued, memory can become a heavy if not

debilitating burden, and he identified modernity's obsession with the past as excessive and even potentially 'harmful to life'. Several of the papers presented here also suggest that acts of remembrance can be equally traumatizing, thus lending support to claims that it is often less painful to forget than to remember. Or, as Veena Das (2006) has shown, memories and experiences of extreme violence may continue to shape everyday life and social relations until they enter into the realm of the ordinary.

Over a century after Nietzsche, our obsession with the past has intensified as media and other technologies have spawned the development of entirely new, and often commodified, memory industries (Adorno 1991; on Vietnam see Schwenkel 2006). All of the papers here speak to the global spread of what Andreas Huyssen (2003) calls 'memory fever'—distinct from the historical fever of Nietzsche's time, but similarly serving to reaffirm relations of power and forms of authority that give legitimacy to the nation-state, a point which I will return to below. 'Memory fever', however, is not continuous, but follows the ebbs and flows of broader state and social transformations. This is a recurring observation made in the papers: the contributors all demonstrate that the significance of memory in everyday life tends to heighten in societies undergoing sweeping geopolitical and/or socioeconomic reform. As struggles to define and exert control over the past intensify, memory becomes a pillar of stability and a tool of defiance, particularly in contexts where new forms of social exclusion and instability loom large. Here I am thinking about emerging post-Cold War relationships to global capitalism that inform many of the case studies discussed here, and which have prompted the recoding and regeneration of displaced memories, often in strikingly nostalgic ways.

Yet, for all the contestations and creative acts of remembrance illustrated in the papers, not unlike Berliner's prediction, there is great diversity in the approaches used to conceptualize and theorize memory. Contributors have engaged with multiple and at times intersecting frameworks, methods and sites to study the shifting roles, values and meanings of memory. They have also adopted a range of 'memory expressions' to capture the complex confrontations and negotiations between individuals and the state, including public memory, official memory, social memory, collective memory, historical memory, living memory and just plain memory. Such terms, of course, are not in all cases interchangeable; each references a particular memory relationship that is neither fixed nor mutually exclusive, but often coexisting with other forms. Moreover, authors may encounter certain ethnographic limitations in their use of a particular expression of memory. James Young (1993, 2000), for example, has cautioned against the uncritical usage of 'collective memory' for it suggests a state of uniformity and homogeneity in commemorative practices. Instead, Young advocates attention to the diverse and disparate 'collected memories' that circulate between and among particular social groups.

Now let me return to the correlate of memory: forgetting. In recent years, in response to the rising popularity of memory studies in and beyond anthropology, scholars have begun to shift their attention to the role and the place of forgetting. This broadening of the field is evident in this collection; several of the papers address how an embattled politics of remembrance is intertwined with sanctioned acts of forgetting. What I find notable here is that in contrast to multifaceted theorizations of memory that have occupied the field, there lacks a corresponding analytical framework for understanding the 'art of forgetting' (Forty and Kuchler [eds] 1999). And unlike the range of memory expressions adopted

in ethnographic literature, there are few terms invented by anthropologists to convey the complexities of forgetting. Why not, for example, develop a theory of 'social forgetting', 'collective forgetting' (or, in the spirit of Young, 'collected forgettings'), or even 'national forgetting' following Renan (1990 [1882]) who first observed that both remembrance and forgetfulness play an important role in the construction of national identity and national history. So it seems we need to think more carefully and analytically about what it means to forget—the techniques and forms it may take in differing social, temporal, and spatial contexts. Under what conditions is forgetting involuntary?

In his book, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, David Lowenthal (1998) argues that heritage is enhanced by historical erasure and acts of forgetting. Collective oblivion, he claims, whether deliberate and purposeful or not, can potentially benefit the national good. Renan made a similar observation when he argued that nations are forged around memories of mutual suffering and communal forgetting. How does a nation heal in the aftermath of a devastating civil war or following a traumatic history of slavery? Forgetting, Hobbes once proclaimed, is ultimately the basis of a just state (thus the etymological connections between amnesty and amnesia). Do we have an obligation to forget histories of trauma and violence in order to reintegrate individuals into society? What is at stake in forgetting? Lowenthal (1999: xii) asks us to consider the extent to which societies need to practice strategic and partial forgetting—what he calls 'artfully selective oblivion'—in order to maintain the unity and legitimacy of the nation-state.

This is where ethnography can make a strong contribution to the field, as the papers do here, for it offers a comprehensive method for producing deeply engaged and contextualized understandings of how remembrance and forgetting both shape and reflect local, national and global relations of power and constructs of meaning. Take, for example, Hyeon Ju Lee's informed analysis of Korean memory and knowledge production that addresses the understudied subject of North Korea. There are several important interventions that this paper makes with regards to the state. First, Lee reminds us that *all* states maintain a powerful, regulatory influence over memory, and that its manipulation and suppression takes place not only in socialist 'authoritarian' societies (as conventional logic claims), but also in capitalist 'democratic' ones (particularly in countries that still adhere to anticommunist ideologies). This is important to emphasize because, frankly, it is often not addressed. So I am still waiting for a book, in the spirit of Rubie Watson (1994), on memory, history and opposition under state *capitalism*. And like Watson's approach to socialist societies with its emphasis on dissent, I would also like to learn more about alternative scripts in Korean society that challenge dehumanizing representations of North Koreans and the devaluation of their memories and expertise.

Lee also raises the specter of forgetting. It is unsettling to hear that the war is being 'forgotten' in Korean society. Yet I had to ponder, given that the legacies of the Cold War are still strongly felt and experienced in still-divided countries: forgotten by whom? And in which social and political contexts? Not unlike in the United States, a war memory fever also exists in Korea, particularly in the film and media industry. Recent years have seen several award-winning, Korean-produced yet globally-marketed films that explore stories of the war and its enduring consequences, keeping the past alive for younger generations through 'prosthetic memories' (Landsberg 2004). I know this because I have seen these films for sale in Vietnam, pirated copies that are mass-produced and subtitled

in China and then sold in Vietnamese cities to domestic and foreign viewers. Through a transnational culture industry, memory of the war is sustained both locally and globally (Schwenkel 2009).

There are two ethnographies that are particularly useful to thinking through these tensions between remembrance and forgetting that also surface in Chien-yuan Chen's paper: Jennifer Cole's (2001) *Forget Colonialism?* and Rosalind Shaw's (2002) *Memories of the Slave Trade*. Both of these works argue that memory practices are not always readily observable or recognizable. Anthropologists may in fact be looking for memory in all the wrong places and then rushing to the conclusion that important events and life experiences have simply been forgotten. For example, in Shaw's study, she seemed to have found a surprising case of amnesia concerning the slave trade but, upon closer examination, she discovered that this past is rarely articulated through direct oral communication. Rather the past finds expression in other representational forms, beliefs and practices, such as spirit divination, ritual performance and the presence of malevolent spirits.

Like Lee, Chen also demonstrates how enduring Cold War constructs continue to shape and underpin current memory practices. In both South Korea and Taiwan, the 'collapse of communism' as celebrated in the liberal West remains but an imagined future rather than a present reality. These US-allied countries continue to wage ideological war against their socialist neighbors, though in these papers we see how such contemporary battles unfold in very particular ways in the terrain of history and memory. This terrain is by no means uniform and monolithic; it is often marked by contradiction and opposition. Chen's paper on the politics of naming the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, for example, highlights the tensions that have surfaced between past and future imaginaries. Discordant memories reveal both situated relationships to a Cold War past and competing national visions for the future. As Thomas Laqueur (1994) has argued, there are high stakes involved in naming and renaming practices, particularly when it comes to the threat of forgetting. At the Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall, these stakes are both political and emotional for the state and individual actors involved. A visit to this site during the conference made clear the enormous affective and political investments that give meaning to this highly symbolic national space and craft a very specific national and historical imaginary.

Notably, Chen's paper takes a nuanced and critical approach to thinking through the state and its multifaceted memory work. He demonstrates that state memory projects—such as renaming the memorial hall—are not independent or spontaneous government acts, but emerge through complex and carefully choreographed interactions between state and other officials who are differently positioned to benefit from these commemorative decisions. Because state memorial intentions are neither fixed nor uniform, they can never be clearly known or fully disclosed. State memory work remains contested, variable, and unpredictable. Layered and equivocal meanings that imbue state memorial sites, including Taipei's memorial hall, are thus more the norm than they are the exception.

Such observations serve to unsettle conceptions of the state as all powerful and dominant in its exercise of historical authority, particularly in socialist societies as we see in Margaret Bodemer's paper on Vietnam. Through her careful ethnography of Hanoi's Museum of Ethnology, Bodemer shows how state and Party control over memory is not absolute. As Chen also noted, multiple state actors contribute to dynamic reproductions of national

memory, but here Bodemer finds that non-state actors have also played a significant role in shaping exhibit representations of the postwar subsidy period. Museums in Vietnam have long been sites of shifting national and transnational histories (Schwenkel 2009). What is new and particularly interesting in Bodemer's analysis are the types of stories collected and communicated in the exhibit. Rather than producing conventional narratives of heroic sacrifice and victory, here we find the unprecedented inclusion of painful personal memories and experiences of postwar poverty.

But why now, in this particular moment of post-economic reform, do we find a return to this difficult and publicly 'forgotten' chapter in Vietnam's history? What about 'market socialism' has facilitated not just the circulation of new narratives and representations of the subsidy period, but also their eager consumption and discussion by multiple generations? There seems to be a strong tendency in the exhibit, perhaps reflective of the curators' intent, to salvage and recuperate memory—memories of hardship and suffering, but also of creative strategies adopted by the populace to overcome everyday scarcities. These are survival narratives, and their sanctioned distribution in a public space of memory served a broader therapeutic purpose of social and national healing. The will and desire to remember and engage in public discussion of the unspoken (for the subsidy period was never truly 'forgotten') is striking here. The exhibit thus became a site of 'reflective nostalgia' (Boym 2001), prompting a recuperation of the past through collective processes of recovery that also entailed an intergenerational transmission of memory.

Daniel Roberts' paper on farmers in rural China makes a similar intervention in the study of cross-generational transmission of memory, also in a socialist context. But in this case, unlike the mobilization of memory witnessed at the museum exhibit, here its transmission to youth does not always take place as expected. Roberts instead identifies a 'breakdown' in memory that disrupts routine, cross-generational flows of historical trauma and recollections of the past. Historical-temporal categories that reference decisive state governance policies (such as land reform) serve to frame both historical consciousness and individual subjectivity, though in ways that differ remarkably from one generation to the next. What remains constant is the 'assumption of historical continuity' that both underpins a teleological narrative of social and national advancement and maintains a vision of the Chinese nation-state at the center of history (Litzinger 2000: 68).

Roberts laments that anthropological studies of memory do not typically account for generational differences in memory practices. This point is well taken. Yet perhaps we need to look beyond anthropology, to interdisciplinary studies in the humanities, to determine what moral, cultural and theoretical insights ethnography would gain from cross-generational studies of memory. We might look, for example, to the field of Holocaust Studies. Marianne Hirsch's (1997) pioneering work on postmemory comes to mind here. Postmemory, Hirsch explains in her book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, acknowledges the continuation and regeneration of memory for children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, generations whose 'experience' of trauma is once or twice removed. Likewise in Roberts' study, members of postmemory generations have a different, albeit equally significant and formative relationship to the past.

Like other authors in this collection who caution against the use of tired binaries in the study of memory, Roberts also demonstrates the need to transcend clearly delineated

state/people boundaries to focus on the intersections and cross-fertilizations of memory. Sensui Hidekazu's paper on Okinawa similarly challenges the borders that are drawn between particular arrangements or assemblages of memory. To understand memory and knowledge production, his study of George Kerr's scholarship on Okinawa reveals, requires a decentering of the autonomous state. Here the role of outside forces becomes important to *transnational* memory-making (and remaking) practices as representations of the past are mobilized for competing and often contradictory ends. This paper shows most clearly that the project of history often transgresses national boundaries.

The role that complicity plays in Sensui's paper raises once again important questions about fields of power and historical productions of memory, though here such fields are demarcated epistemologically in addition to politically (Trouillot 1995c: 115). This raises the troubling possibility of our own complicity in state and other memory projects. All of the contributors to this collection have participated in a similar exercise of power and knowledge production; each has produced a set of ethnographic truths or representations of the shifting dynamics of memory in Asian societies. A focus on Kerr thus incites us to reflect more critically on our own memory and knowledge practices, as well as our particular methodologies. Fieldwork has long been regarded as the enduring hallmark of anthropological inquiry. But what are its limitations for producing ethnographies of memory and memorial practices? Sensui's paper demonstrates the importance of historiography in anthropological studies of memory. This is of course not unprecedented (see Trouillot 1995 or Litzinger 2000, for example), but it does mark an important methodological intervention in this collection insofar as it reminds anthropologists that research on memory requires both ethnographic and historical techniques. Yes, this translates into more time sitting and reading in archives—an unfamiliar practice to many. But historical research is an important methodological component of ethnography, particularly ethnographies of memory, for it works to contextualize and help us better understand the historical stakes and significance of the intertwined politics of remembrance and forgetfulness.

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