



ARCHIVIO ISTITUZIONALE DELLA RICERCA

Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna Archivio istituzionale della ricerca

When Memory Exceeds History: The Emerging Visual Internet Archive on the Cultural Revolution

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

When Memory Exceeds History: The Emerging Visual Internet Archive on the Cultural Revolution / Tesini, Mario; Zambenardi, Lorenzo. - In: INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY. - ISSN 1369-118X. - STAMPA. - 25:8(2022), pp. 1067-1081. [10.1080/1369118X.2020.1834601]

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/773648> since: 2022-11-04

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1834601>

Terms of use:

Some rights reserved. The terms and conditions for the reuse of this version of the manuscript are specified in the publishing policy. For all terms of use and more information see the publisher's website.

(Article begins on next page)

This item was downloaded from IRIS Università di Bologna (<https://cris.unibo.it/>).
When citing, please refer to the published version.

This is the final peer-reviewed accepted manuscript of:

Mario Tesini & Lorenzo Zambenardi (2022) When memory exceeds history: the emerging visual Internet archive on the Cultural Revolution, Information, Communication & Society, 25:8, 1067-1081, DOI: [10.1080/1369118X.2020.1834601](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1834601)

The final published version is available online at: [10.1080/1369118X.2020.1834601](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1834601)

Rights / License:

The terms and conditions for the reuse of this version of the manuscript are specified in the publishing policy. For all terms of use and more information see the publisher's website.

This item was downloaded from IRIS Università di Bologna (<https://cris.unibo.it/>)

When citing, please refer to the published version.

When memory exceeds history: the emerging visual Internet archive on the Cultural Revolution

Mario Tesini and Lorenzo Zambenardi

ABSTRACT

One of the areas that the advent of the Internet has changed most profoundly is the relationship that human beings have with their past. Sources that would once have been barely accessible after a difficult and taxing search are now available to one and all, and can be compared to more traditional texts. The article sets out to show how knowledge of Mao's China and the Cultural Revolution in particular will benefit significantly from the immense pool of recordings and video clips available on the Internet. With the resources afforded by the Web, a brand-new way of linking up words and images, text and visual sources, has become possible, providing the study of history and memory with unexplored tracts of promising terrain. But the importance of this emerging material is not just to do with historical knowledge and methodology. Its main contribution is political: the persecutors and the victims of those years have spoken out, they have deposited their memories online, exercising a faculty that the Cultural Revolution and post-Maoist political institutions had denied them for decades. Through the bottom-up perspective that the Internet provides, the historical protagonists have been able to bear witness in potential perpetuity without needing the researcher's mediation. By speaking directly to the public, the witnesses cease to be merely pieces of the past. They are not just victims or perpetrators who condemn past deeds, but, as the actors who made and endured history, they can turn themselves from passive historical figures into active political agents.

KEYWORDS

Archive; Cultural Revolution; Internet; Mao; memory; resistance

Introduction

One of the areas that the advent of the Internet has changed most profoundly is the relationship that human beings have with their past (Liu, 2019; Smit et al., 2017). Sources that would once have been barely accessible after a difficult and taxing search are now available to one and all, and can be compared to more traditional texts in real time. The article sets out to show how knowledge of Mao's China and the Cultural Revolution in particular will benefit significantly from the immense pool of recordings and video clips available on the Internet. Although there are obvious problems and risks in working with online material (Hale et al., 2017; Luyt, 2015), the Internet provides researchers with an unprecedented and potentially almost limitless documentary archive (Chun, 2008, p. 154).¹ In particular, the interpretation of the Cultural Revolution is today being upheld, completed and made more vivid by documentary material now on the Internet. But the importance of this emerging archive is not just to do with historical knowledge and methodology. Its main contribution is political: the persecutors and the victims of those years have spoken out, they have deposited their memories on line, exercising a faculty that the Cultural Revolution and post-Maoist political institutions had denied them for decades. In doing so they have turned the Web into a formidable place of conservation and propagation of memories told from below, which add images, words, and individual stories to the impressive but stone-cold casualty numbers of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.²

The goal of the article is not, therefore, to further discredit the Cultural Revolution, but rather to show the new possibilities offered by the 'digital turn' in the study of historical reality and in the practice of memory as a political tool. Indeed, as Milan Kundera (1995, p. 4) famously wrote, the 'struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'. The article divides up as follows. The first part briefly describes the changing international image enjoyed by the Maoist regime since the 1950s. After discussing the political meaning of the testimonies offered by the Internet, the second part of the paper examines some of the most

significant online visual material about the Cultural Revolution— a kind of permanently evolving archive, as we said. The article ends with some considerations on the significance of online material for contemporary China.

The changing image of the Cultural Revolution

In the space of a few decades the verdict on Mao's China has gone from celebration to something midway between wiping that myth out of the collective memory and an increasingly accurate historical description of a whole political experience and its immense human and social cost.

The fascination with Mao's China was one of the most enigmatic aspects of the twentieth century (Leese, 2011). Outside China, Mao's political myth peaked in 1968 when he became an inspirational figure for whole generations of dissident American and European youth (Chi et al., 2017; Lovell, 2019). Suffice it to quote a few figures pertaining to what was one of the greatest publishing successes of all time. Appearing in 1964, the booklet *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (popularly known as the Little Red Book) circulated in over a billion copies over the ensuing decade in over fifty languages and an unquantifiable number of local editions, at a period when the world population did not exceed four billion (Cook, 2014, p. xiii). For many vaguely communist- inclined militants, and a new generation of unusually politically-minded youngsters, Maoism was the dynamic, revolutionary alternative to the grey bureaucratic face of Soviet communism. When the first books began to reveal the hard face of Chinese Maoism behind the regime façade, they were paid scant attention ³As late as 1975 Mao's China retained its fascination: the future Nobel for Literature Dario Fo was hymning the difference between commodified western man and true democracy under Mao. Questioned as to the room for dissent, Fo answered in a way that gives us pause: 'It seemed to me there was enormous room. If you're alert, you catch that very clearly during debates. Everyone truly says what they think' (in Farrell, 2015). Even when the old leader died (9 September 1976), the mystique of his person and policies went on, and not only among the left-wing. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1976), president elect of France on a ticket of liberal modernization, would refer to Mao as 'a beacon of world thinking'⁴ When US President Gerald Ford, succeeding Nixon after the Watergate scandal, learnt of the Chinese leader's death, he spoke of Mao as 'a most remarkable and a very great man' and stated that it was tragic that a statesman of 'this ability and will and vision and foresight has been passed away' (in Smith, 1976).

A kind of protective curtain was thrown round the Maoist regime by a strange mix of Realpolitik, the will to believe, the limited opportunity for reliable documentation, and the extreme and almost proverbial remoteness of China at the time. Things have changed. By the beginning of the 1980s the massive and pervasive Maoist cult of the previous decade had sunk almost without trace. A new line of academic research and investigative journalism has begun unveiling the real picture behind the dream of a socialist society in the process of construction. Over the years a number of studies have been published on the failures and disasters of Maoism in power, analyzing the devastating effects of the Great Leap Forward and the aberrations of the Cultural Revolution.⁵ More importantly, China itself has opened a new chapter in research with works such as Feng Jikai's *Voices from the Whirlwind* (1991) and Tan Hecheng's monumental *The Killing Wind* (2017), which is for the Cultural Revolution equivalent to another classic of contemporary Chinese history, *Tombstone* (2012) – dealing with the mayhem of the Great Leap Forward. Archive-based research is still in its infancy, conditioned by a nationwide stop-and-go policy as the country alternately liberalizes and then plunges back into authoritarianism.⁶ But research is not impossible, as witness the works by Frank Dikötter (2011), Michel Bonnin (2013) and the study by Yang Su (2011) on atrocities and collective killings

during the Cultural Revolution which are largely based on research in Chinese archives, interviews, leaked documents, and articles in local gazetteers.

Memory as a political tool

In addition to these growing academic and journalistic works there is now a virtual field of online knowledge that is opening up new lines of research. The Virtual Museum of the Cultural Revolution, the online journal *Remembrance*, the Cultural Revolution Collection at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the seemingly suspended Exchange for the Cultural Revolution in Various Regions contain and make available a collection of primary sources and exchanges of views, which further enlarge and deepen the knowledge of those years.⁷

The main argument of the present article, however, is that political analysis and, more generally, public culture has an enormous lot to learn from visual sources. To paraphrase Tocqueville, Mao's was a new form of despotism: bearing the clear stamp of the leader's creative fancy, imagination in the service of power, and as such prone to translation in visual form.⁸ It was a myth that sprang up around the Chinese leader, based on his ability to convey political reality by language and gesture. The Mao's myth was constructed upon a linguistic as well as physical image of the leader. It drew on quotations from and photographs of him, beginning with the archetypal shot by American journalist Edgar Snow who would be second to none in building and maintaining that myth in the West⁹ However, thanks to the twofold revolution of the image brought about by the Internet (in terms of accessibility and circulation of digital content), we nowadays possess a quite different range of visual material giving insight into that uniquely spectacular political creation which was the Maoist regime. As the French sinologist Anne Kerlan (2013, p. 97) has rightly pointed out, 'If the official history of Communist China is strictly controlled, a parallel history has started to develop since the end of the 1990s. It has developed in the margins of official history: in fiction writing, in overseas publications, and, more and more, on video and on internet websites'. Indeed, an emerging internet archive has come into existence affording documentary resources that both confirm the truth of accounts and analyses at the time and enables us to radically revise the nature and basis of that myth.

It is becoming clear that, with the resources afforded by the Web, a brand-new way of linking up words and images, text and visual sources, has become possible, providing the study of history and memory with unexplored tracts of promising terrain (Brügger & Schroeder, 2017). The changeover from reading documents to direct viewing of pictures in itself offers a more richly faceted prospect for analysis. Take the Tiananmen Square rallies at which Mao urged young people to revolt. While his words on the printed page carry a clear message, the political and social climate of that age emerges so much more tangibly from the pictures and videos that nowadays we can all easily access on the Internet. Thanks to 'the technologies of memory' (Sturken, 2008; Van House & Churchill, 2008), history can now be experienced by those who did not live through it.

And a new relationship between past, present and future is now emerging. A number of studies have rightly suggested that the Internet is a potential arena for the promotion of alternative memory narratives that could challenge official accounts (Foster, 2014; Haskins, 2007; Yang & Wu, 2018).¹⁰ Moreover, studies on Chinese online collective memory have examined how the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution (Zhang, 2012) are remembered in blogs and debated on online encyclopaedias (Gustafsson, 2019). However, we are not just suggesting that the internet archive is merely helping to create a plural history. The fact is that this online material provides a powerful tool of agency and emancipation for the individuals who lived through

the Cultural Revolution and can bear witness. Its emancipatory nature lies in the fact of being a means of expression for those who were voiceless and powerless, and also for those who perpetrated violence but understood the absolute corruption of unrestrained power. From this viewpoint, the internet archive is not solely about acquisition of facts, evidence building, and recollection; it is not only about historical and political knowledge.¹¹ Through the truly bottom-up perspective that the Internet provides, the historical protagonists have been able to bear witness in potential perpetuity without needing the researcher's mediation. Thanks to the Web not only do the witnesses no longer stand in need of being remembered since they can perform that action by themselves, but by speaking directly to the public they cease to be merely pieces of the past. They are not just victims or perpetrators who, by sharing their tragic testimony, condemn past deeds, but, as the actors who made and endured history, they can turn themselves from passive historical figures into active political agents.

In a very different historical context, the power of testimony was explored by the Holocaust survivor Primo Levi, who became a writer in order to bear witness to his experience of the Nazi camp (Agamben, 2005). Why do we still find Levi's personal memories of Monowitz (i.e., Auschwitz III) more penetrating than the historical inquiries into the concentration-camp universe available in today's literature? Why does *If This Is a Man*, originally published in 1947, still give privileged access to the dark, complex world of the Holocaust? Not only for the quality of Levi's writing or for his objective reconstruction of the horror of the camp, but precisely because his book provides the reader with a direct deposition of that experience. And, no doubt, when testimony assumes a visual form and can easily be replicated and distributed like the online material on the Cultural Revolution, its power is still further multiplied.¹² Here lies the paradox of the Internet archive: it is an archive whose 'texts' cannot be 'archived' because they are constantly present and easily accessible.

At this stage, three main issues must be addressed. Firstly, devotees of the traditional archive have rightly spelt out the dangers of online material, especially its scope for fabrication and manipulation of facts to confuse, misdirect and condition society. No doubt there are dangers with online material: when the whole depositum historiae lies at the click of a mouse there is a real risk of being bemused by information overkill. The enormous of sources, their inevitably patchy quality and reliability (Connerton, 2008), and their fragility, certainly raise an issue about selecting and interpreting material the Web (Brügger, 2013, p. 759; Dougherty & Schneider, 2011). To cite one example: in a web site called the Chinese Cultural Revolution Research Net Jiang Qing, Mao's last wife, was portrayed not only as a scapegoat, but even as a martyr (Yang, 2007). This being said, many of the admittedly fair criticisms being thrown at online source reliability and accessibility are actually a modern version of age-old issues: it is simply the technological context that has changed. Documents and accounts have always been perishable and alterable. Historians and students of memory have at all times been used to living with the issue of source dependability. Is a document authentic? If so, is it telling the truth? Such questions remain the scholar's prime task, now as in the past. Clearly, without proper cultural, intellectual and methodological training one is bound to fall into confusion and distortion. However, if selection and interpretation of sources is necessary, one must also accept the fact that there can be no consolidated predefined scheme for conserving, or even preliminarily sifting, documentation.

Secondly, another issue is the current absence of a catalogue website which brings together the existing online resources on the Cultural Revolution. One might wonder whether it could be possible to create such a digital repository in the near future. Although it would be useful to store this disparate material in a digitally networked way, today a project of this kind would be inevitably incomplete. Indeed, some of the witnesses of that historical epoch are still alive, and they are likely to continue to offer their recollections for many years to come. Thirdly, it is only right to note that in China, the country where the material here discussed should be most relevant, the internet archive on the Cultural Revolution is now far from being easily

accessible. Not surprisingly, its impact on official history and on the growing positive reappraisal of Mao in a variety of Chinese institutions is negligible.¹³

That is all entirely correct. It would be naive and foolish to suggest that this emerging internet archive has the potential to contribute to political change in China. How then are we to think of the role of memory and testimony in China? The active emancipatory nature of this online material does not lie in being an immediate challenge to the existing ruling system, but rather in turning memory into something that exceeds history as knowledge of the past. As we shall see, some of the witnesses of the Cultural Revolution do not merely recall the horrors of the past but question the meaning of those horrors for the present. In other words, they turn their 'retrospective memories' on the past into 'prospective memories' about what 'still needs to be done' (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013). Thus, today's failure to influence public discourse in China – i.e., the failure to turn personal testimonies into collective memory –, though certainly disappointing, is no failure at all because these individuals' depositions are helping everyone who is ready to listen to understand 'the past pertaining to his future' (Aron, 1961, p. 334). Or, as Lindgren and Phillips (2016, p. 161) have recently argued, these memories may turn into 'lessons from the past', which 'might impact future attitudes and behavior'. Not only do these fragments of counter-memory save facts that seemed condemned to or obfuscation, but they also show how it is possible not to bow to the silencing will of political authority. Indeed, thanks to the amplification and retrievability of the Internet, these accumulated voices help to critically reflect upon the past and future of China (Liu, 2019).

By no means coincidentally, at present in China a battle is known to be raging over the Web (Esarey, 2015). Against a backdrop of compromise between those in power and the world colossi of ICT, a campaign of bans and technological censorship is being countered by no-less-technological outwitting and revindication on the part of an embryonic Chinese public opinion (Clothey et al., 2016; Lee, 2016; Yang & Jiang, 2015). But as the Nobel peace prize laureate Liu (2006, p. 181) put it in one of his most often quoted passages, 'the Internet is God's present to China'.¹⁴ And what is true today of China's nascent public sphere clearly applies to the politics of memory. It thus seemed appropriate, and of practical utility to further research, to offer and discuss some significant examples of this burgeoning new online material.

The Cultural Revolution on the emerging visual Internet archive

All attempts even provisionally to define the bounds of this huge digital reservoir of documentation available to all and sundry are, of course, doomed to obsolescence from one moment to the next. This paper is by its very nature partial and essentially orientational. But even as things stand at present, one can grasp how extraordinarily our understanding and interpretation of Mao's regime, and especially the Cultural Revolution, have expanded. One of the most interesting fruits of this online documentation is the evidence given by those youths who were egged on to commit unspeakable crimes the length and breadth of the country. In some cases, testimonies have been volunteered spontaneously; in others, they have been prompted by Chinese journalists and filmmakers or the international press. For the persecutors have reached a time of life when those past episodes come back to haunt their consciences and drive them to perform what some of them have described as a duty of atonement and soul-baring. If one types terms like 'Red Guards, confession' into a search engine, one will come across these anguished fragments of life review. We find a woman, not yet fourteen at time, who informed on her teacher, who was then degraded and humiliated – one typical episode among innumerable others. After living with her sense of guilt for decades, the woman brought herself to seek out the aged and fading lady and beg her forgiveness.¹⁵ Or we may find a 2013 video of a 60 year-old man who, in front of the cameras, talks of his adolescence in 1970 when he told the police his mother had torn up and burnt a portrait of Mao, for which she was summarily executed (intrafamilial delation is known

to have been one of the most abject features of the Cultural Revolution).¹⁶ Again, an elderly emigré to the US, himself a former Red Guard, relates by way of setting the record straight how a mixture of cowardice and ideological connivance prevented him from lifting a finger to defend his young wife from manhandling and abuse by his militant companions.¹⁷

So Maoism has drastically changed its image. Gone are the days when Italian television produced and released a long documentary under world-famous director Michelangelo Antonioni (i.e., *Chung Kuo, Cina*, 1972), in which Tiananmen Square was described as ‘the revolutionary heart of all China’.¹⁸ At that time the mind turned immediately to the mass choreography celebrating the ‘Great Helmsman’. One photo more than any other – one that anyone of a certain generation must have seen: Mao greeting the crowd and ushering in the new season of revolution by waving a Red Guard armband, as legions of young fanatics brandished the Little Red Book. The young Red Guard who had the honor of pinning the armband onto the Leader’s jacket was called Song Binbin.

The photo of that moment is equally famous, summing up the values of an epoch. Daughter of a prominent regime member who had figured among the founders of the CCP, a student at the elite school where the daughters of Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi also studied, Song had assumed the leadership of the institute. The place would witness one of the first of the Cultural Revolution’s innumerable crimes. Charged with revisionism, Vice-principal Bian Zhongyun was brutally humiliated for weeks on end before being clubbed to death by a group of girl students with nailed sticks. The episode is highly relevant to our argument. Although this story is familiar to students of Chinese history and has appeared in conventional written forms, what the Internet offers is a visual narrative that goes beyond the mere historical facts. The images of this episode escaped the oblivion into which the atrocities of history may sink, because of two quite different sequels. Both are connected with the universe of visual sources and their conservation, especially in being circulated on the Internet. The first regards the career of Song Binbin. There she was, figuring so prominently at the ceremony of 18 August 1966. But 13 days before she had presumably witnessed or taken part in massacring that victim of the Cultural Revolution (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik & Jinke, 2016).¹⁹ She later moved to the United States and would have a brilliant career at Boston’s MIT in the field of environmental science. Today, side by side with that photo of Mao’s chosen symbol of a new revolutionary generation, we can view another shot taken nearly fifty years on. At the same school of her Maoist youth, Song appears with head bowed in contrition and homage, flanked by a group of erstwhile Red Guards, before the bronze bust to their schoolmistress victim. ‘Please allow me to express my everlasting solicitude and apologies to Principal Bian [...] I failed to properly protect the school leaders, and this has been a lifelong source of anguish and remorse’. So ran *The Beijing News* on 13 January 2014, reporting her words.

The other reason why pictures of Bian’s tragic and symbolic destiny have survived is completely different. It is owed to the joint action of two iron wills. The first was shown by her husband Wang Jingyao who, hard on the atrocity, did his utmost to preserve the memory of the event, beginning by photographing his wife’s martyred body in all its gruesome detail. The second was displayed by the independent filmmaker Hu Jie who achieved what he did in response to a moral call. The film he devoted to the event, *Though I Am Gone*, is a powerfully poetic documentary and includes a dignified shot of the venerable husband.²⁰ Hu Jie’s work enjoys real visibility both inside and outside the borders of China and goes some way to confirming the role of images in preserving memory.²¹ Despite limited means, this director draws on narrative talent and that instantly recognizable moral tension which is a hallmark of intellectuals living under regimes.

Hu Jie had previously saved another story from oblivion, one that would hardly be credible were it not for its miraculous preservation through visual documentation. This is the story of Lin Zhao and her brief life (1932–1968). Brought up as a communist intellectual and a first-class pupil at the party school of journalism, she actually received a Christian upbringing. As early as the Hundred Flowers era she was prompted to express criticisms, and went on to repeat them in the wake of the Great Leap Forward. In 1960 she was arrested and received cruel treatment in prison since she refused to recant. In 1968 she would be executed. What is it that puts Lin Zhao's story out of the common pattern for those years? During her confinement, seeing that she was denied paper and ink, she pricked her finger with a hairpin. Heroically unbowed, she thus managed to write an impressive range of works in her own blood: poems, articles and letters that had no hope of being delivered. However, page after page was preserved by the prison authorities as evidence against her, and would finally end up – here again that peculiar feature of post-Maoist China, on-and-off moments of free expression and historical research – in the hands of a home-documentary maker who would reconstruct her story, to the point of quitting his job and devoting himself to safeguarding a memory in danger of being lost.²²

The grave of that original defier of an incomparably stronger regime is at her birthplace, Suzhou, a picturesque town in southeast China, all canals, bridges and classic gardens. Here four years after Lin Zhao's death, Michelangelo Antonioni's unwitting troupe would linger to capture some of the most enchanting shots of their documentary. The grave has become a site of restrained but persistent devotion, at times threatened by bans, at times tacitly connived at.²³ Is it too much to claim that something about China's democratic future lies with the future memory of Lin Zhao and her literary output committed to the fragile medium of her blood? As with other areas of Chinese society, one gets the impression of a recent clampdown: from the relative freedom of access to the grave in 2012, we now find cordons of police.²⁴ Here again, stop and go.

There is something Shakespearian about the Maoist universe. Seemingly unbelievable stories find confirmation thanks to images. The fate of a key military figure in Maoist China almost beggars belief. Luo Ruiqing, fondly nicknamed 'Luo the Tall' for his stature, was an old soldier renowned for his blind allegiance to Mao. For that reason he was long in charge of the leader's security and would even be promoted Minister of Security and Chief of the General Staff of the PLA. He fell from grace following a tirade against his alleged crimes delivered by the wife of Lin Biao at a meeting of the Politburo chaired by Mao – a speech lasting ten long hours. Thereafter Luo began to be treated as a reprobate.

Driven to despair at this reward for a lifetime's loyalty, on 18 March 1966 he attempted his own life by throwing himself off the roof of his home where he was under house arrest. But this too was seen as a form of treason. Here again the internet revolution enables us to click onto and see what the butchers of that time wanted to turn into a public example, for reasons of political education. One has but to type in the name of Luo Ruiqing to summon up two photos on a single 'Google images' screen: one of lanky Luo genially showing Mao how a new rifle works, and side by side another showing him reduced to a bundle of rags and blood inside a wickerwork basket. Not only the comparison of these two images of Luo make history come alive, but they are truly worth a thousand words.

We will inevitably have to limit our selection of emblematic episodes. But one last figure deserves our attention, perhaps more than any other. On Tiananmen Square that 18 August 1966, not on the platform beside Mao but amid the sea of Maoist youth, was a contemporary of Song Binbin's. Not just a contemporary but, like the protagonist of that memorable day, one of the top echelons of the capital's higher education. From a common stable, but radically different in their reactions. The girl in question is not stamped on public memory by any iconic photo. But we do have, as we shall see, a text (a letter to Mao!) which, had it been known in the West, would have been dismissed as little more than the quirk of a saboteuse. She was called

Wang Rongfen, a 19-year-old student of German. On returning home from the Tiananmen rally Wang thought that there was no difference between what she just saw and the mass demonstrations in Nazi Germany. Thus, she decided to write a letter asking Mao: 'What are you doing? Where are you leading China?' 'The Great Cultural Revolution is not a mass movement, but one man moving the masses with the barrel of a gun. I solemnly declare: On this day, I withdraw from the Communist Youth League of China' (Wang, 2015, pp. 149–150). She also wrote a letter in German and put it in her pocket. Then she went in front of the Soviet embassy and drank four bottles of insecticide with the goal of drawing world attention to the horrors which were taking place in China. However, rather than being found dead by the Soviets, as she hoped, she survived and was sentenced to life imprisonment.

The girl survived both prison and Mao without recanting. After serving twelve and a half years of confinement, Wang Rongfen was freed in 1979 under the first phase of Deng Xiaoping liberalization. Today, thanks to the Internet, we possess further information and pictures. After quitting China on the morrow of the Tiananmen Square repression, Wang lived in Germany, translating from German into Chinese, including Max Weber's *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* (Wang, 1997). In 2008, forty-two years on from her letter to Mao, she was to write another and clearly quite different letter, this time as a human rights activist, addressed to the man who had become the President of the People's Republic of China: Urging Hu Jintao to Punish Crimes Against Humanity in the Cultural Revolution. Wang reminded the Chinese leader of the suffering he himself had undergone during the Cultural Revolution, along with many members of the post-Maoist ruling class: Mr. Hu, you personally experienced the Cultural Revolution while at Tsinghua University, so you are naturally aware of the influence of that 18 August event, when Mao Zedong for the first time reviewed the Red Guards and wore their armband.²⁵

Among the sources discoverable on line, there is a peculiarly poignant video dating from 20 August 2011: an outline of Wang Rongfen's incredible life trajectory lasting less than four minutes.²⁶ In it we hear the voice of the student whom long ago the police scooped up from the pavement outside the Soviet embassy in Beijing. In firm tones Wang, the survivor who can bear witness, demands justice and the voice of historical truth for the victims of that decade of criminal folly, the real nature of which she had intuited right from the start – not only intuited but marked by a spectacular gesture. The value of Wang's testimony transcends the historical boundaries of the Cultural Revolution. Her deposition is not merely a means to preserve and transmit historical knowledge to future generations, but rather it can help to see the present differently and see a different future. Indeed, her testimony appears as an example of 'prospective memory' (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013), in which the past is invoked in the context of present-day and future concerns.

That her words to Hu Jintao should have met with no reply is hardly surprising. Although post-Maoist Chinese authorities described the Cultural Revolution as an error, the time has not yet come for a transparent public debate, for that would mean putting its main instigator on trial. Actually, in recent years the prospects for an open public discussion on China's past have considerably diminished. While for more than three decades, in line with Deng Xiaoping's famous judgment on Mao's achievement (70% right, 30% wrong), some of Mao's decisions could partly be criticized, in today's China the 'Great Helmsman' is becoming almost untouchable once again.²⁷ Indeed, the new paramount leader Xi Jinping 'has been careful to defend Mao's legacy and eager to portray the PRC as boasting a record of proud accomplishments that stretches all the way back to its founding' (Zhao, 2016, p. 85).

Not coincidentally, Mao's picture still hangs in Tiananmen Square, presiding over the country's political and economic development. An increasingly capitalist China (in mentality no less than economic model) uses for

²⁵

its daily monetary transactions banknotes on which that face still underpins today's leaders in their uncontested political legitimacy.

But regardless of past and present responses by Chinese authorities, the online visual material presented here, as Wang Jingyao solemnly declared, is vivid 'evidence' of the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution and deserves 'to be seen by others' (in Hu, 2007), today or in some possible future.

Conclusion

As shown in the article, the visual internet archive on the Cultural Revolution not only has value for the scholar, but obviously bears on life in contemporary China as well. Although those 'who are fighting against the obliteration of the present generation's memory [...] are' still 'in a minority', as Bonnin (2007, p. 53) argued, the 'development of the Internet has created new possibilities for spreading current research and analyses of the Cultural Revolution'. Yet, it is a highly anomalous situation where some of the most important books on the history of that country in the twentieth century cannot be read inside China. Or that there should be a ban on viewing films, videos and documentaries dealing with the Mao era, or indeed many an important subsequent moment. The question is, how long can censorship survive – or what Liu Xiaobo called 'enforced amnesia' – into the twentieth-first century, the century of the Internet? How far can the question of Mao's role in Chinese history hold out against the evidence of documentaries by Hu Jie and a welter of material available online? When the day comes, it is bound to have political repercussions in China.

Notes

1. The connection between proliferating digital information and the new forms of historical knowledge has been keenly studied for several years. See, for example, Karpf (2012) and Weller (2012).
2. On popular historiography in China see Bonnin (2019).
3. This was very much so with Simon Leys' book, *Les habits neufs du Président Mao. Chronique de la Révolution culturelle* (1971).
4. Déclaration du président Giscard d'Estaing. 9 September 1976. <http://langlois.blog.lemonde.fr/2014/01/22/la-mort-du-president-mao-vue-la-television-francaise-1976/> (accessed 20 November 2018).
5. The literature on the Cultural Revolution is now huge and very diverse in its claims and goals. See, for example, MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006) and Clark (2008).
6. For an insightful extensive review on the historiography of the Cultural Revolution published in mainland China see Bonnin (2007).
7. On the Virtual Museum of the Cultural Revolution see <http://www.cnd.org>. On Remembrance see <http://prchistory.org/remembrance/>. On the Exchange for the Cultural Revolution in Various Regions see <https://archive.is/jDa6d>.
8. In the famous chapter 'What Kind of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear', Tocqueville (2000, pp. 661–665) discussed the 'new features' despotism could assume. The analogy

between the despotism discussed by Tocqueville and Mao's in China lies in their novelty, though clearly the two phenomena are different.

9. See First Pictures of China's Roving Communists. *Life* (25 January 1937), p. 9.

10. See Pernin (2014) on independent documentary films as tools to transmit memories.

11. On writing on the Chinese past as an act of political resistance see Béja (2019).

12. On the power of images see Zelizer (1998).

13. We allude, for example, to President Xi Jinping's Maoist revival and, at the more societal level, to the use of Maoism by a variety of Chinese Marxist student groups in order to denounce the exploitation of workers in both state-owned and multinational firms.

14. On the two different 'faces' of the internet as both a technology of liberation and a tool used to control society see Diamond (2010) and Mozorov (2012). For a skeptical view on the democratic potential of the Internet for Chinese social and political life, see Wang (2014) and Sullivan (2014). On the growing constraints on the Internet in China see Repnikova and Fang (2018) and Roberts (2018).

15. Confessions of a Red Guard, 50 years after China's Cultural Revolution. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/15/asia/china-cultural-revolution-red-guard-confession/index.html> (accessed 29 June 2019).

16. Chinese Cultural Revolution: the boy who denounced his mother. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2013/mar/27/chinese-cultural-revolution-mother-video> (accessed 4 July 2019).

17. Still ashamed of my part in Mao's Cultural Revolution. BBC News. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXAOTjNheVg> (accessed 2 July 2019).

18. In January 1974, the political group around Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, fiercely criticized the documentary for being too aesthetic and hence decadent in content. That attack on the film was a polemical hangover from the X National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party where Jiang Qing and her acolytes stood opposed to the 'reformist' group of Zhou Enlai, who had once procured Antonioni his invitation. On the political controversy over Antonioni's documentary see Leys (2015, p. 518).

19. We are still unsure about the role of Song Binbin in the killing of Bian Zhongyun. Song denies to have participated in the beating, but Wang Youqin, a student of the Girl's Middle School, accused Song to have played an active role (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik & Jinke, 2016).

20. It can be seen with English subtitles at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBfGc3-InrA> or

French at <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2c8w29> (accessed 5 September 2019).

21. On Hu Jie's work see Li (2009) and the documentary *The Observer* (2018) by the Italian director Rita Andreotti. Hu Jie is also the author of the heart-rending *Mother Wang Peiying*, which reconstructs the story of a railway worker widow, mother of seven children, who publicly called for Mao's resignation after the Great Leap Forward disaster. She was initially committed to a psychiatric hospital. Then, after refusing to recant, she was arraigned in a sensational mass trial held at the Workers' Stadium and executed on 27 January 1970. See <http://www.cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/play/51224/My-Mother-Wang-Peiying> (accessed 6 September 2019). For more about the extraordinary filmmaker see Johnson (2015).

22. At present it can be viewed on Youtube in two parts: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2il-JrCC-2I> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhonmVorwX0> (accessed 2 August 2019). On the life of Lin Zhao see Lian (2018) and Kerlan (2018).

23. 44th Anniversary of Lin Zhao's Death, Memorial Activities Allowed. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDdiqYDqim8> (accessed 30 August 2019).

24. Chinese Police Cordon Off Grave of Mao-Era Dissident, Detain Dozens of Activists. Radio Free Asia (1 May 2017). Available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/grave-05012017104157.html> (accessed 7 July 2019). The way the Chinese authorities have handled the importance that Lin Zhao's grave has taken on for the Chinese dissident movement would merit a study in its own right. To understand the running battle in China over freedom of expression and communication on the Internet see Henochowicz (2015).

25. The full text of the letter appears as 'China's Great Wall of Silence: Dr. Rongfen Wang's Letter to President Hu Jintao' in the blog *Public Occurrences* (11 March 2008). Available at: <https://publicoccurrenc.blogspot.it/2008/03/chinas-great-wall-of-silence-dr-rongfen.html?m=0> (accessed 5 November 2018). Wang Rongfen looks back over her singular career in an interview with Radio Free Asia, 'Dear Chairman Mao, Please Think About What You Are Doing' (16 May 2016). Available at: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/chinacultrev-05162016173649.html>.

26. Wang Wrote to Mao to Quit Youth League. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hq1w9SZuzTU> (accessed 8 June 2019).

27. Interviewed on the possibility of archival research on the Cultural Revolution, historian Frank Dikötter declared that 'Over the past five years it has become very, very difficult

for professional historians to do anything on that decade. It is as if there is a narrowing of that very little space of freedom and memory that ordinary people had for decades after the death of Chairman Mao', in Funnell (2017).

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank Micòl Beseghi, Simone Dossi, Augusto Valeriani, and two anonymous reviewers of *Information, Communication & Society* for their several helpful suggestions.

Notes on contributors

Mario Tesini is Professor of History of Political Thought at the University of Parma. His main areas of research are the French Revolution, French liberalism in the nineteenth century, especially Tocqueville, Gaullisme and Anti-gaullisme in relation to the Algerian conflict, and Italian politics during the Cold War. He has recently edited (with L. Zambernardi) a study on Mao's myth in the western world: *Quel che resta di Mao. Apogeo e rimozione di un mito occidentale* (Le Monnier 2018).

Lorenzo Zambernardi is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Bologna. His research has been published in the *European Journal of International Relations*, *History of European Ideas*, *International Political Sociology*, *International Relations*, *Political Studies Review*, *Review of International Studies*, and *The Washington Quarterly*. He has recently edited (with M. Tesini) a volume on Mao's myth in the western world: *Quel che resta di Mao. Apogeo e rimozione di un mito occidentale* (Le Monnier 2018).

References

- Agamben, G. (2005). *Remnants of Auschwitz: The witness and the archive*. Zone Books.
- Aron, R. (1961). *Introduction to the Philosophy of history: An Essay on the Limits of history*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Béja, J.-P. (2019). Writing about the past, an Act of Resistance: An Overview of independent journals and publications about the Mao Era. In S. Veg (Ed.), *Popular memories of the Mao Era: From critical debate to assessing history* (pp. 21–42). Honk Kong University Press.
- Bonnin, M. (2007). The threatened history and collective memory of the Cultural Revolution's lost generation. *China Perspectives*, 4, 52–64, <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.2573>.
- Bonnin, M. (2013). *The lost generation: The Rustication of China's educated youth (1968–1980)*. The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- Bonnin, M. (2019). Popular memories and Popular history, Indispensable tools for understanding Chinese history: The case of the end of the Rustication movement. In S. Veg (Ed.), *Popular memories of the Mao Era: From critical debate to assessing history* (pp. 220–234). Honk Kong University Press.
- Brügger, N. (2013). Web historiography and Internet studies: Challenges and perspectives. *New Media & Society*, 15(5), 752–764. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812462852>
- Brügger, N., & Schroeder, R. (2017). *The web as history: Using web archives to understand the past and the present*. UCL Press.
- Chi, M., Dard, O., Fleury, B., & Walter, J. (2017). *La Révolution culturelle en Chine et en France*. Riveneuve.
- Chun, W. H. (2008). The enduring ephemeral, or the future is memory. *Critical Inquiry*, 35(1), 148–171. <https://doi.org/10.1086/595632>

- Clark, P. (2008). *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A history*. Cambridge University Press.
- Clothey, R. A., Koku, E. F., Erkin, E., & Emat, H. (2016). A voice for the voiceless: Online social activism in Uyghur language blogs and state control of the Internet in China. *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(6), 858–874. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1061577>
- Connerton, P. (2008). Seven types of forgetting. *Memory Studies*, 1(1), 59–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698007083889>
- Cook, A. C. (ed.). (2014). *Mao's little red book: A global history*. Cambridge University Press.
- Diamond, L. (2010). Liberation technology. *Journal of Democracy*, 21(3), 69–83. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.0.0190>
- Dikötter, F. (2011). *The Cultural Revolution: A people's history, 1962–1976*. Bloomsbury.
- Dougherty, M., & Schneider, S. M. (2011). Web historiography and the emergence of new archival forms. In D. Park, N. Jankowski, & S. Jones (Eds.), *The long history of new media* (pp. 253–266). Peter Lang Publishing.
- Esarey, A. (2015). Winning the hearts and minds? Cadres as microbloggers in China. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 44(2), 69–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261504400204>
- Farrell, J. (2015). *Dario and Franca: Passion unspent*. Ledizioni.
- Feng, J. (1991). *Voices from the Whirlwind: An oral history of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. Pantheon.
- Foster, M. (2014). Online and plugged in? Public history and historians in the digital age. *Public History Review*, 21, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.5130/phrj.v21i0.4295>
- Funnell, A. (2017). Why Mao's Cultural Revolution still haunts Xi Jinping's China. ABC, October 17. Retrieved June 3, 2019, from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-17/why-maos-culturalrevolution-still-haunts-xi-jinpings-china/9047782>
- Gustafsson, K. (2019). Chinese collective memory on the Internet: Remembering the Great Famine in online encyclopaedias. *Memory Studies*, 12(2), 184–197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017714836>
- Hale, S. A., Blank, G., & Alexander, V. D. (2017). Live versus archive: Comparing a web archive to a population of web pages. In N. Brügger, & R. Schroeder (Eds.), *The web as history: Using web archives to understand the past and the present* (pp. 45–61). UCL Press.
- Haskins, E. (2007). Between archive and participation: Public memory in a digital age. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 37(4), 401–422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940601086794>
- Henochowicz, A. (2015). Sensitive words: Trying to visit Lin Zhao's Grave. *China Digital Times*. May 6. Retrieved September 1, 2019, from <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/05/sensitivewords-trying-to-visit-lin-zhaos-grave/>
- Hu, J. (2007). *Though I am gone*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBfGc3-lnrA>
- Johnson, I. (2015). China's invisible history: An interview with filmmaker and artist Hu Jie. *The New York Review of Books*, May 25. <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2015/05/27/chinasinvisible-history-hu-jie/>
- Karpf, D. (2012). Social science research methods in Internet time. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 639–661. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.665468>

- Kerlan, A. (2013). The trial of the 'gang of the four'. In C. Delage & P. Goodrich (Eds.), *The scene of the mass crime: History, film, and international tribunals* (pp. 89–100). Routledge.
- Kerlan, A. (2018). *Lin Zhao: "Combattante de la liberté"*. Fayard.
- Kundera, M. (1995). *The book of laughter and forgetting*. Faber and Faber Limited.
- Lee, S. Y. (2016). Surviving online censorship in China: Three satirical tactics and their impact. *The China Quarterly*, 228, 1061–1080. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001454>
- Leese, D. (2011). *Mao cult: Rhetoric and ritual in China's Cultural Revolution*. Cambridge University Press.
- Leys, S. (1971). *Les habits neufs du Président Mao*. *Chronique de la Révolution culturelle*. Éditions Champ Libre.
- Leys, S. (2015). *Images brisées* (1976). In S. Leys (Ed.), *Essais sur la Chine* (pp. 455–552). Robert Laffont.
- Li, J. (2009). Virtual museums of forbidden memories: Hu Jie's documentary films on the Cultural Revolution. *Public Culture*, 21(3), 539–549. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2009-007>
- Lian, X. (2018). *Blood letters: The untold story of Lin Zhao, a Martyr in Mao's China*. Basic Books.
- Lindgren, M., & Phillips, G. (2016). Asbestos memories: Journalistic 'mediation' in mediated prospective memory. In A. Hajek, C. Lohmeier, & C. Pentzold (Eds.), *Memory in a mediated world* (pp. 158–178). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Liu, J. (2019). Contested past: Social media and the production of historical knowledge of the Mao Era. In S. Veg (Ed.), *Popular memories of the Mao Era: From critical debate to assessing history* (pp. 61–79). Honk Kong University Press.
- Liu, X. (2006). God's gift to China. *Index of Censorship*, 35(4), 179–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03064220601093009>
- Lovell, J. (2019). *Maoism: A global history*. Bodley Head.
- Luyt, B. (2015). Debating reliable sources: Writing the history of the Vietnam War on Wikipedia. *Journal of Documentation*, 71(3), 440–455. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-11-2013-0147>
- MacFarquhar, R., & Schoenhals, M. (2006). *Mao's last revolution*. Harvard University Press.
- Mozorov, E. (2012). *The net delusion: The dark side of the Internet freedom*. Public Affairs.
- Pernin, J. (2014). Performance, documentary, and the transmission of memories of the great leap famine in the folk memory project. *China Perspectives*, 4, 17–26. <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.6572>.
- Repnikova, M., & Fang, K. (2018). Authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0: Netizens as thought work collaborators in China. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27(113), 763–779. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1458063>
- Roberts, M. (2018). *Censored: Distraction and diversion inside China's great firewall*. Princeton University Press.
- Smit, R., Heinrich, A., & Broersma, M. (2017). Witnessing in the new memory ecology: Memory construction of the Syrian conflict on YouTube. *New Media & Society*, 19(2), 289–307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815604618>
- Smith, C. S. (1976). China mourns death of Mao Tse-tung, 82. *UPI Archives*, September 9. <https://>

www.upi.com/Archives/1976/09/09/China-mourns-death-of-Mao-Tse-tung-82/ 3151536020174/

Sturken, M. (2008). Memory, consumerism and media: Reflections on the emergence of the field. *Memory Studies*, 1(1), 73–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698007083890>

Su, Y. (2011). *Collective Killing in rural China during the Cultural Revolution*. Cambridge University Press.

Sullivan, J. (2014). China's Weibo: Is faster different? *New Media & Society*, 16(1), 24–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812472966>

Tan, H. (2017). *The killing wind: A Chinese county's descent into Madness during the Cultural Revolution*. Oxford University Press.

Tenenboim-Weinblatt, K. (2013). Bridging collective memories and public agendas: Toward a theory of mediated prospective memory. *Communication Theory*, 23(2), 91–111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12006>

Tocqueville, A. de (2000). *Democracy in America*. University of Chicago Press.

Van House, N., & Churchill, E. F. (2008). Technologies of memory: Key issues and critical perspectives. *Memory Studies*, 1(3), 295–310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698008093795>

Wang, R. (1997). *Cäsarismus und Machtpolitik. Eine historisch-bibliographische Analyse von Max Webers Charismakonzept*. Duncker & Humblot.

Wang, R. (2015). Dearest chairman Mao: What are you doing? In M. Schoenhals (Ed.), *China's Cultural Revolution, 1966–1969: Not a dinner party* (pp. 149–150). Routledge.

Wang, S. (2014). Internet exposure and political beliefs among educated youth in China. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 23(90), 1133–1151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2014.898903>

Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, S., & Jinke, C. (2016). Whodunnit? Memory and politics before the 50th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution. *The China Quarterly*, 227(September), 734–751. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000734>

Weller, T. (2012). *History in the digital age*. Routledge.

Yang, G. (2007). 'A portrait of Martyr Jiang Qing': The Chinese Cultural Revolution on the Internet. In C. K. Lee, & G. Yang (Eds.), *Re-envisioning the Chinese revolution: The politics and poetics of collective memories in reform China* (pp. 287–316). Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

Yang, J. (2012). *Tombstone: The great Chinese Famine, 1958–1962*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Yang, G., & Jiang, M. (2015). The networked practice of online political satire in China: Between ritual and resistance. *International Communication Gazette*, 77(3), 215–231. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048514568757>

Yang, G., & Wu, S. (2018). Remembering disappeared websites in China: Passion, community, and youth. *New Media & Society*, 20(6), 2107–2124. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817731921>

Zelizer, B. (1998). *Remembering to forget: Holocaust memory through the Camera's eye*. University of Chicago Press.

Zhang, J. (2012). China's social memory in a digitalized world: Assessing the country's narratives in blogs. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 25(2), 275–297. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6443.2012.01431.x>

Zhao, S. (2016). Xi Jinping's Maoist revival. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(3), 83–97. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0051>