



An historian friend of mine once remarked: "History's like a whore: anyone in power can screw her!"

—Zhang Zhenglong.¹

After some two decades as a People's Liberation Army (PLA) propagandist and writer, Zhang Zhenglong, an army officer in the Shenyang Military Region, undertook a study of the War of Liberation in the north-east of China, the bloody civil war that led the Communist Party to power in 1949. *White Snow, Red Blood*, a 600-page, often-emotional account of the party's north-eastern campaigns, appeared in late 1989. The shocking revelations it contains about the party and army—including details of PLA officers' involvement in opium smuggling—caused an immediate sensation, and it is said to have sold particularly well

A small matter of truth

During the heady 80s historians raked China's rich past, unearthing many surprises. Now, as Geremie Barmé suggests, official histories again prevail.

in Beijing. In mid-1990, however, according to an army source, Zhang was put under investigation and the book sparked a purge of the army publishing industry.

Zhang had been in an ideal position to investigate the story. As a trusted member of the armed forces in the north-east he found many local old military men and civilians willing to speak to him. Years of writing reportage, a form of investigative journalism popular in China since the mid-1980s, gave Zhang a confident and fluent style. And the boom in publishing of the late 80s that led publishing houses to search out new and sensational books encouraged him to believe—like so many others—that he enjoyed a new freedom of expression. An official imprimatur was given to the project when the PLA Publishing House included his book in a series on the revolutionary wars.²

White Snow, Red Blood presents an historical account of the party's

army that conforms entirely with what the population learnt about the PLA in June 1989. For many army people the most controversial aspect of the book is the detailed account of the martial feats of the 'renegade' Lin Biao, the military commander of the campaign (who was later designated Mao Zedong's chosen successor, only to die mysteriously in 1971), and an objective description of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist army. However, for the average reader the most devastating section of the book must certainly be Part 14, "City of Death", which describes in chilling detail how, in 1948, the PLA laid siege to Changchun, the provincial capital of Jilin, and starved it into submission. An estimated 150,000 civilians are said to have died in this stand-off between the Communist and Nationalist forces that was previously described as a "bloodless victory".

Despite the explosive nature of the material and the author's provocative anti-war commentary

throughout the narrative, the book continued to be sold for some months surviving for a time the general purge of the publishing industry initiated by the party in August 1989. Even the leading pro-government apologist 'intellectual' He Xin praised the book in conversation with this writer and cited its continued sale as proof that the cultural purge was aimed at specific "turmoil-related" elements only. Then in August 1990 came the rumours of Zhang's work being subject to internal review, and the detention of the head of the PLA publishing house for questioning. By November the Hong Kong and Taiwan press reported the rumours and published excerpts from the book.

Zhang was fully aware of the danger of pursuing independent historical research in China. Some of his informants were all too mindful of the explosive nature of their knowledge. Zhang, however, was anxious to get them to speak before it was too late. "Time is no longer our friend" he reflects in his introduction, written in February 1989. He compares some of the reticent old soldiers (some reveal that they have the information he wants, but they can't possibly tell him) to the black box or flight recorder in an airplane disaster. "Imagine that after incredible difficulties you actually manage to locate the black box only to discover you can't open it!" While many other writers were attracted to historical topics as a kind of escapism, Zhang says, he had found in history numerous "forbidden zones" and "dangers lurking at every turn". "Sometimes I just wanted to run away." He even speculates about the need for "political insurance" for China's reportage writers, if indeed any insurance company would sell such a policy.

By revealing so many unsavoury details of the supposedly most glorious chapter in the PLA's history, Zhang has so tarnished the image of the party's 'Great Wall of Iron' that no amount of insurance could have kept him safe.

Historical writing and research in China enjoyed a period of unrivalled development in the 1980s. Many saw a key to understanding and

dealing with the dilemmas of contemporary China in the past, especially in the history of the last century. Although the party presented its own definitive view of post-1949 history in a document released in 1981,³ a body of works that constitutes the basis of a 'parallel' history gradually appeared throughout the 1980s.

One reason for this is that many older cadres and party apparatchiks who survived the party purges or reappeared after years of ignominy were not satisfied with merely having their names cleared, or having a lifetime of effort affirmed solely in the vague and abstract formulations of a Central Committee



document. They wanted to tell their own story. While state-supported publications were soon filled with the often lugubrious and elliptical memoirs of these elderly worthies, publishing houses forced to rely on book sales to survive produced volumes claiming to reveal fuller and more intriguing versions of the recent past. Mao Zedong's personal life and tales of 'court' intrigue during the Cultural Revolution were among the richest veins mined by publishers in the late 1980s.⁴

Developments in the Soviet Union also had a crucial impact on attitudes towards history. As Wen Yuankai, a leading Chinese thinker, said in January 1989:

The bold measures which Gorbachev has taken since assuming office have had an extremely profound and subtle effect on China. Nearly all the reforming socialist nations are presently re-examining their

own histories, including the great Stalinist purges. Every day new details are revealed, not only in the Soviet Union but in other countries as well, including China. This has made China reflect deeply on its own past.⁵

With the increasing publication of documentary materials and personal recollections, autonomous views of the past began to emerge, confounding the party's interpretation of events and even challenging its legitimacy as the sole source of historical truth. Investigative journalists, previously interested predominantly in contemporary issues, also began to delve into the past, and from the mid-1980s produced some of the most widely-read works. Of these writers, the woman journalist and fiction writer Dai Qing is perhaps the most outstanding.

Dai produced long investigations of two "historical mysteries" which involved the silencing and eventual death of outspoken intellectual critics of the party. One was Wang Shiwei, the main object of attack in the ideological struggles in the party's wartime guerrilla base of Yan'an in the early 1940s. Dai uses this case—the first cultural purge carried out by the party—to dissect the nature and style of such campaigns, revealing in the process that Wang was beheaded in 1947. The other was Chu Anping, a journalist and famous liberal who spoke out against the party's monopoly of power in 1957. He disappeared in the early days of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Both remain unrehabilitated. Dai's writings, part of a longer series of historical investigations, had one main thrust. As she put it:

...I'm writing for the sake of the present. If it weren't for this I wouldn't bother writing about these cases. In my opinion the situation is exactly the same today, that's why I wanted to tell the truth about these incidents; so people can read about them and think: how come nothing's really changed, why hasn't there really been any progress?

Dai was also involved in collecting data on the Cultural Revolution with Su Xiaokang, a journalist who was one of the main script writers of the controversial 1988 tele-series *River Elegy*, and now an exile in Princeton. Some of this material appeared alongside Dai's study of Chu Anping in early 1989, although the magazine in which it was published was banned in August of that year.⁶

History-related works that have been outlawed since the massacre range from the serious, such as Dai's writings, to the sensational such as Su Xiaokang's account of the Lushan Conference of 1958, which many see as the prelude to the Cultural Revolution, and Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao's history of the Cultural Revolution, and even the sacrilegious such as *Their Struggle—from Marx to Hitler*.

Independent historical writing both contributed to and profited from the ideological collapse of China in the 1980s. On 13 May 1989, a petition signed in Shanghai by a group of poets and literary critics declared publicly that writers had a "right to history". Different from any of the other appeals supporting the student demonstrators in Beijing, it read in part:

Writers must have the freedom to analyse, explain and publish their views on all aspects of Chinese reality both historical and present, in particular political incidents. For a party official to use his position or administrative powers to restrict or interfere with writers or deprive them of their freedom of expression or publication is not only an abuse of power, but illegal.

The rewriting of history has been an important feature of the party's efforts at self-justification since June 1989. The official description of the carnage of the Beijing massacre as a riot by hooligans is the most obvious case in point. The media has also been used extensively to prove the 'historical necessity' of party rule and socialism in China. The most notable example of this has been *On the Road*, a four-part documentary series first screened in August 1990. Glossing over the "errors" of party

rule, it affirms that China's salvation lies in socialism. There have been other such programs, like *Love for the Republic*, which deals with the commitment of scientists to the motherland, and *The Spirit of China*.

Old war films from the early 1950s have also been shown in prime viewing time as part of the revolutionary re-education of the youth of the nation. Much publicised newer films include a tale about Deng Xiaoping's youthful military career (*Bose qiyi*), and an epic-length extravaganza on the founding of the People's Republic (*Kaiguo dadian*). As 1990 was the 150th anniversary of the first Opium War, much was made of the blood shed by patriotic martyrs and revolutionaries for the cause of national independence. The message is simple: the blood debt of the past is so great, no citizen today has the right to renege on the final choice of history for China: marxism-leninism.

The response to the sprouts of independent history writing that appeared in the late 80s among orthodox party historians is perhaps best reflected in comments the leading ideologue Hu Qiaomu made on 8 March 1990 at a national meeting on party history. Hu, the man directly in charge of overseeing the production of an official party history for the 70th anniversary of the founding of the party this year, said that "...the study of party history...is not oriented to the past; it is to confront the present and face the future...Like other areas of the party's ideological work our endeavours are concerned with supporting the leadership of the party, it is part of the struggle for the socialist enterprise in China." In other words, the task of history or historiography is didactic; history is to be used to illustrate, not to establish, the truth.

In that speech Hu Qiaomu attacked the activities of feral historians like Dai Qing and Su Xiaokang in a classic passage of double-think:

Our struggle is that of science against anti-science, the struggle of truth against lies. Originally the true face of history was like this, but inimical forces are dead-set on

obliterating, distorting and slandering the truth about the past revolutionary struggles of the party and the people. It is for this reason that we must use a scientific attitude, scientific methodology and scientific proofs to elucidate the various basic questions of our party's history.

Hu has been an active practitioner of the "science" of history since the 1940s. It is said he helped compose the key 1945 resolution that outlines the life of the party from 1921 which one observer remarked is little more than a "history of Mao Zedong". He also had a guiding hand in the 1981 document with its highly fictionalised view of post-1949 history. Taken together these documents now form the basis for the official party history. Hu's general attitude to inconvenient historical source material is illustrated by his instructions to archivists some years ago to buy and hide away the memoirs of Zheng Chaolin, a famous trotskyite jailed from 1952-1979. The book, published for limited circulation in China, contained personal details of the lives of revolutionaries now enshrined in the party's pantheon.

Hu Qiaomu has also been one of the architects of the party's "creation myth", the "Yan'an spirit" which is still touted as the bedrock of party rule. In Yan'an, now referred to as the "holy land of the revolution", the party evolved a Chinese version of the stalinist political purge and solidified a hierarchy under Mao Zedong which, despite the vicissitudes of the past 40 years, has remained essentially unchanged. The eminent elders who still rule China are cadres from the Yan'an period.

The party leaders have taken a number of steps to ensure that Yan'an traditions—notably self-reliance and hard struggle—keep the nation hamstrung. To help promote the deadening spirit of the past, a new Yan'an Spirit Research Institute was established in Beijing in mid-1990. In late 1989 "Awards for the Elite of Useful Old People" were also created, not long after the Beijing massacre. These awards are to ensure that "the older revolutionaries who have been through the baptism

of fire will live happily...and continue to contribute to the society". At the same time "golden citations" for "Good Children who Revere the Aged" were also established. To vouchsafe the loyalty of its young people the revolutionary party that took as its cause a total break with the crushing traditions of the Chinese past is in its own old age relying increasingly on "ancestor worship" and filial piety with socialist characteristics.

In the summer of 1988 Zhang Zhenglong, who was writing *White Snow, Red Blood*, was inspired by the news from the Soviet Union that high school history examinations were being cancelled and texts revised. He reflected on the relationship between the makers and inheritors of history in China:

That final war [of 1948] laid waste to the black earth of the

north-east. But since then what has continued to defile it? As it's the grown-ups who've thrown the family chronicle into chaos, how can we ever hope that our children will continue it?...If you expect sincerity from your children, you must be honest yourself.

The dissident historian can thus be as threatening as the political activist or pamphleteer.

GEREMIE BARMÉ is a research scholar at the ANU, Canberra.

1. Zhang Zhenglong, "What is History?" (*Lishi shi shenme?*), the author's introduction to *White Snow, Red Blood*—the Liao-Shen Campaign (*Xuebai xiesheng—Liaoshen zhanyuan*), Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1989, p.5.

2. A number of other books in the series have come under a cloud, and it has been reported that other semi-fictionalised accounts of pre-1949 party and army history have been banned

or named during the purge of army publications.

3. "The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China's Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China", adopted by the Sixth Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 27 June 1981.

4. Some of the most popular writers of this genre of 'history' are the 'entrepreneur writers' Ye Yonglie, Quan Yanchi and Liu Yazhou.

5. Zhang Weiguo, "Cohesion and Confidence are more Crucial than the Economic Situation: Wen Yuankai's Analysis of the Current Situation" (*Ningjuli he xinxin wenti bi jingji xingshi geng yanjun: Wen Yuankai dui dangqian xingshi de fenxi*), World Economic Herald (*Shijie jingji daobao*), 9 January 1989. This translation is from New Ghosts, Old Dreams, edited by G. Barmé and Linda Jaivin, New York: Times Books [in press].

6. The fourth issue of the magazine *Dongfang jishi*, produced in Nanjing, was listed in the Index of Books and Periodicals Banned from Sale (*Jinxi xiaoshou de shukan wulu*) compiled by the national News and Publishing Authority and published in Beijing by the Municipal News and Publishing Bureau in August 1989, p.11.



In the tenth anniversary of the Khmer Rouge accession to power in Cambodia, Deng Xiaoping shocked those who saw China's foreign policy as determined by a fear of Soviet encirclement. He said the USSR may "still retain the bases provided by Vietnam"—the former US military facilities at Cam Ranh Bay—if Moscow stopped supporting Hanoi in Cambodia.

China had outlined its priorities. Beijing's policy was less defensive against the Soviets than forward-looking, aimed at Southeast Asia, and locked in rivalry with Hanoi. Thus, after the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in February-March 1979 (in which Beijing lost 60,000 killed and wounded), Deng proclaimed that "it is wise for China to force the Vietnamese to stay in Cambodia, because that way they will suffer more and more...".

The German China specialist Rudiger Machetzki has pointed out that from 1977 to 1980, only 5% of China's anti-Soviet commentaries appeared in domestic Chinese media. Even in 1980, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, all but 40 out of 2,400 Chinese condemnations of the USSR were for foreign con-

Into the wrong hands

Ben Kiernan examines the less than inscrutable motivations behind the latest Australian and Chinese initiatives on Cambodia.