

Modern Erasures: Revolution, the Civilizing Mission, and the Shaping of China's Past

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Why did “class struggle” based on pre-liberation categories continue in the socialist economy of the People’s Republic of China, and why did it, at least from time to time, turn to extreme violence? Fuller is hunting big game in this volume, which focuses on both the local (Gansu in particular) and the national across the twentieth century (the 1920s and 1950–60s in particular). He links epistemic violence to physical violence, and thus the nationalist project of May Fourth radicals to Maoist murderers. The result is a challenging analysis of the intellectual, social, and political transformation of modern China.

Fuller advises us to look less at left–right struggles in China, particularly in the PRC period, and more at tensions between the local (“communal memory”) and the national (“revolutionary memory”), tensions that he sees as having emerged out of the death agonies of the Qing dynasty. Less than half of the book deals with Maoism, and only the fourth of four parts with the PRC. First, Fuller traces epistemological violence, or the “erasure” of prerevolutionary capacities to build civic institutions and pursue the common good. In other words, May Fourth radicals and liberals dismissed the old society as *totally* backwards and deficient, a view that formed the basis of revolutionary memory. In fact, however, Fuller argues that one can see in both the great Haiyuan earthquake of 1920 and the famines of the 1920s that local elites and religious networks *did* respond to ameliorate suffering and did act to build local communal memory. Evidence such as steles, diaries, oral history, gazetteers, and even newspaper accounts demonstrate this. Nonetheless, Western missionaries and most Chinese accounts dismissed traditional welfare activities or never noticed them in the first place. “May Fourth coverage could have accurately dismissed village mutual aid and civic activity as inadequate and overwhelmed. Doing so, however, would have acknowledged their very existence” (p. 83). Instead, “erasure” constituted revolutionary memory.

As Fuller also points out, the crisis conditions of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were essentialized as representing the eternal condition of China (or the inherently evil nature of traditional culture—May Fourth radicals) and the “character” of the Chinese (who cared nothing for human life—missionaries). Fuller is not the first to suggest that missionaries’ criticisms influenced May Fourth views, but he pushes this argument in the direction of the very core of modern state-building. Fuller concludes, indeed, that “revolutionary memory resembled the cultural production of colonialism from which it drew ... In this sense, the revolutionary project was in practice less a defense of the local from imperialism than an outgrowth of

colonial modernity” (p. 292). If Chinese society was bankrupt, then revolution was the only way forward, which came at the expense of communal memory.

Fuller also emphasizes the similarities between the essentialized critiques of traditional society—especially rural backwardness—made by the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party. China as both parties depicted it was a land of oppression and starvation. It was, however, the CCP that was able to make inroads in the countryside by teaching liberation through class struggle. Fuller’s discussion of CCP propaganda through such media as woodcuts and drama is well-informed and incisive. The CCP worked at the local level by finding evil landlords and empowering poor peasants to attack them, and simultaneously by fitting these thousands of local stories into a national framework. In other words, elements of objective reality—say, a landlord who distributed grain during a famine—were erased in a torrent of epistemological violence that easily turned into physical violence. And so communal memory lost out to revolutionary memory. It should not be necessary to say that Fuller is not denying the reality of oppression and starvation, but he is saying (if I understand him correctly) that the price of revolutionary essentialization has been extremely high. Whether there were realistic alternatives to revolution is an old debate that Fuller only obliquely refers to.

The converse side of “modern erasures” is modern constructions. The CCP was able to use revolutionary memory—the horrors of preliberation China—not so much to legitimate the Great Leap Forward itself as to ease discontent with its catastrophic aftermath. And as “class” in the 1960s came to refer primarily to political position, divorced from any economic basis, revolutionary memory in the Cultural Revolution was an essential ingredient in the moral posturing of violent rural youth (Fuller does not analyze the more widespread urban violence of 1967 or the state-backed violence of the later years of the Cultural Revolution).

Fuller suggests that the Maoist revolutionary construction of China, being based on a false memory and narrative, was inherently fragile as well as destructive. At least, that is my inference from the rich data he presents. Whether Maoism was fragile or not, Fuller’s historical argument is clear: “Maoist storytelling consisted of a series of innovations to the May Fourth and missionary cultural inheritances” (p. 210) and was thus based on an unwarranted dismissal of traditional Chinese public culture traceable back to Liang Qichao. Fuller briefly notes that the “charting of certain threads of cultural production between the May Fourth movement of 1919 and the peak of the Cultural Revolution fifty years later” is not to imply a linear inevitability (pp. 241–42), but the overall thrust of this volume provides precisely such a from-to narrative. Readers might want greater emphasis on the immediate causes of, say, the Cultural Revolution. Or they might want greater acknowledgement of roots deeper than the late Qing–May Fourth—for example, when Cultural Revolution activists exterminated entire families from grandparents to toddlers, was this more a reflection of revolutionary memory or of the *zhuzu* collective kin punishment long carried out by the imperial state? If *Modern Erasures* suffers from a touch of imperial nostalgia and a deterministic tone, it is nonetheless a remarkably nuanced and largely persuasive contribution to the burgeoning field of memory studies and to our knowledge of the structure of China’s twentieth century revolution.