

Hilpert, Hanns Günther; Krumbein, Frédéric; Stanzel, Volker

## Research Report

# China's guided memory: How historical events are remembered, glorified, reinterpreted, and kept quit

SWP Comment, No. 4/2020

## Provided in Cooperation with:

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

*Suggested Citation:* Hilpert, Hanns Günther; Krumbein, Frédéric; Stanzel, Volker (2020) : China's guided memory: How historical events are remembered, glorified, reinterpreted, and kept quit, SWP Comment, No. 4/2020, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2020C04>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/256599>

## Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

## Terms of use:

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*

# SWP Comment

NO. 4 FEBRUARY 2020

## China's Guided Memory

**How Historical Events Are Remembered, Glorified, Reinterpreted, and Kept Quiet**

*Hanns Günther Hilpert, Frédéric Krumbein and Volker Stanzel*

**In 2019, China commemorated several anniversaries of politically significant events in its recent history: the May Fourth Movement (100 years), the foundation of the People's Republic of China (70 years), the Tibet Uprising (60 years), the beginning of the reform and opening policy (40 years), and the massacre on Tiananmen Square (30 years). How China officially commemorates these events – or does not – weighs heavily on the country's domestic and foreign policy. The state-constructed interpretations of history as a claim to power are directed not only at Chinese society, but also at foreign partners interacting with China, especially governments and companies. The concealment of problematic events from the past is alarming, not least because it increases the danger that historical mistakes will be repeated.**

In its March 2019 strategy paper, the European Union (EU) described the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a cooperation and negotiating partner, a competitor, and a "systemic rival". The divides between the political systems as well as the visions for an international order and its values illustrate the rivalry of the systems.

The Communist Party of China (CCP) does not limit itself to controlling China's society in the present, but also extends its control to the history of the country. Among other things, by ideologising the memory of historical events, the CCP legitimises its rule. The latter thus appears to be the inevitable and consistently positive result of a long history. This ideologisation of one's own history makes cooperation with China difficult, for China's partners are also supposed to accept how historical

facts are concealed, repressed, or reinterpreted – as a result, contemporary politics and society thus appear in a favourable light for the CCP. China's leadership expects that the official view of history will at least be recognised – better still, explicitly confirmed – as legitimate.

Universal values such as democracy and human rights, which have played an important role in various phases of China's recent history, are deliberately discussed and can therefore no longer serve as a basis of appeal for exchanges with China – as in the Committee on Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Affairs of the United Nations General Assembly or in the United Nations Human Rights Council. The People's Republic represents a narrative of human rights that places collective social and economic human rights in the foreground, but it



ignores civil and political human rights as well as the claim of human rights to protect the individual against the authority of the state. In the international human rights discourse, for instance in the United Nations, the “systemic rival” China confronts the West and its version of democracy and human rights, not least by resorting to its own interpretations of history.

Historical narratives form the core of China’s national identity. Belonging to a civilisation that is thousands of years old, and which once located itself in the centre of the universe, shapes the consciousness of its people. It has not been forgotten that the path to modernity was marked by drastic political and social disruption, by the experience of backwardness to the West and Japan, as well as by economic exploitation and military invasion.

Against this background, powerful historical interpretations have been established in China’s politics and society that provide orientation and legitimise the political rule of the CCP. One of these narratives is that a unified, strong, nationally conscious, and centrally governed China is necessary to avoid the chaos, devastation, and humiliations of the time before the CCP seized power, on the one hand, and to protect the country from the hegemonic claims of the West, on the other.

During the course of the reform and opening policy since the late 1970s, from the party’s point of view, subversive political ideas and religious messages poured into the country; an ideological vacuum formed with the transformation to a market economy. In order to legitimise its claim to power again, a new paradigm had to be created instead of Marxism-Leninism, which had failed in practice. Nothing was better suited for this than a recourse to nation and history. Criticism of the feudalism and imperialism during the imperial era, which Mao Tsetung had designed as a system foundation, no longer determined the discourse and gradually receded. Traditions that were formerly frowned upon and partly forbidden are now honoured as the cultural heritage of mankind, and the

few remaining relics from the imperial era have been lavishly restored. The “correct” interpretations of history have formed a new political focus in schools, universities, cadre trainings, and public commemoration ceremonies.

Xi Jinping bases his claim to power and the legitimacy of the party on the history of China like no other national or party leader before him. Xi celebrates himself as the guardian of the tradition of good governance for the good of the people. Whereas under Mao, Confucianism was regarded as the basic evil par excellence, Xi visited Qufu — the birthplace and home of Confucius — and has inserted quotations from his teachings into the official rhetoric.

Knowledge of the events connected with anniversaries and their interpretations in today’s China shows that German and European politicians face (additional) challenges in their cooperation with the country — challenges that are often overlooked.

### **1919: The May Fourth Movement – the Desire for Self-determination and Political Reform**

The May Fourth Movement was a national student movement that was gradually joined by other segments of the population. It was primarily directed against the colonisation of China by foreign powers; additional demands were focussed on the political, social, and economic modernisation of the country. It culminated on 4 May 1919, when about 3,000 students gathered for protests on Tiananmen Square, in Beijing. The trigger was the Treaty of Versailles, in which China was denied the return of the German colonies in Shandong; instead, the colonies were given to Japan. The protests led to the Chinese government refusing to sign the treaty.

In a speech on 30 April 2019, on the occasion of the centenary, Xi linked the May Fourth Movement with the history of the Communist Party of China and the People’s Republic. Three points are characteristic of his interpretation.

Firstly, it establishes a historical continuity that presents the May Fourth Movement as the predecessor of the CCP, which was founded only two years later. Some of the later founders of the CCP were indeed active in the movement, whereas many others had nothing to do with it.

Secondly, Xi declares nationalism to be the core of the May Fourth Movement. He also states that the essence of Chinese nationalism is love for the nation and the party, and that both are the most important duties of all Chinese. His own concept of the “Chinese dream of the great resurrection of the Chinese nation” places Xi in the tradition of the May Fourth Movement.

Thirdly, Xi ignores the diversity of the movement’s political demands, for example for “Mr Democracy” and “Mr Science”. The demand for democracy included the realisation of human rights. The aim was to modernise Chinese politics and society; Western democracy and science were seen as instruments for this.

The main addressees of Xi’s speech are those representing the younger generation of China, who are serving the nation and the party and who should not lack a fighting spirit in the realisation of the Chinese dream. What Xi’s interpretation does not offer is a history of the May Fourth Movement as one that was critical of the government and demanded political reforms, democracy, and modern science along Western lines. This alternative narrative of the May Fourth Movement was taken up by students in 1989. From the perspective of many intellectuals of the Chinese cultural sphere, the true legacy of May Fourth can be found today in Taiwan — the first, and so far only, Chinese democracy.

## 1949: 1 October – the Identity of the People’s Republic

“China has stood up.” With this famous sentence, ascribed to Mao on the occasion of the founding of the People’s Republic of China on 1 October 1949, the question concerning the identity of the new state arose.

Had old China risen again — the empire, the fictional ideal of a civilisation that had been projected into the past again and again for more than 2,000 years? Or was it the “blank sheet of paper” that Mao wanted to fill in a completely new way — a Marxist state, liberated from old traditions?

This question of identity has been answered in different ways in the course of the 70-year history of the PRC; the varied answers reflect the often violent conflict over the orientation of the CCP and the country. Mao’s ambition to be the forerunner of the world revolution, even before the Soviet Union, initially helped to create an identity for the new China. In the PRC, this was followed by the smashing of “feudalism” (landowners, bourgeoisie, and industrialists), land reform (with the expropriation of landowners), and the struggle against the “counterrevolutionaries” (above all the intellectuals). At the same time, it supported Maoist revolutionary movements wherever they emerged. This China was indeed a new one for foreign countries, but the majority of states maintained diplomatic relations with the old China, that of Chiang Kai-shek, which only existed in Taiwan.

The question of identity again rose to the forefront during additional incisive events — the famines of the “Great Leap Forward” from 1958 onwards, and the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, which concealed an internal power struggle within the party. This question was directed at the same time against Confucian and religious as well as other cultural traditions. In 1979 the CCP, under Deng Xiaoping, categorically turned away from any Marxist-based social experiments and the ambition to lead the world revolution. The party was only interested in preserving its power, while the citizens — “getting rich is glorious” — were allowed to do business on their own. Attempts at political reform, such as those undertaken around 1980 and with the uprisings of 1989, were nipped in the bud. For China’s partners, it was an “uneventful” time: The country could be dealt with without having to grapple with old or new narratives. Meanwhile, the

release of private-sector energy led to rapid and ever more dynamic economic growth, and thus to China's current position as the world's second-largest economy.

Eventually Xi, in power since 2012, ended the phase of collective leadership established by Deng and the biggest domestic political crisis since 1989. He has concentrated all power in his hands — now as the leader of a new world power. It is his goal to realise the rise of China and to cement the rule of the CCP through the remembrance of the country's more distant history. With the combination of "Marxist theory and traditional Chinese state leadership", the country is to realise the "Chinese dream", to take again its "rightful place in the world". This makes things more complicated for its partners: The CCP implicitly or explicitly demands from them, again and again, the recognition that China has been forced into a "century of shame" (or "humiliation"), which must now be compensated for. This is one of the central elements of the current narrative, because it can be used to justify demands for special treatment — a special treatment that otherwise has no place in an international order, since the latter is based on the principle of equal sovereign states.

"At this moment, the Chinese of all ethnic groups and all sons and daughters of the Chinese nation at home and abroad are proud of it and congratulate our great motherland with great joy," said Xi on 1 October 2019, on the same balcony from which Mao announced the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. With the largest military parade in the history of the People's Republic, the CCP demonstrated the strength of China to the world — and at the same time the strength of the party to its own people. The last 70 years thus reveal both a history of the rise of a nation and a remarkably successful history of maintaining the power of a party. The latter is now trying to answer the question of its identity between old and new China with a comprehensive view of history. On the occasion of the anniversary of 1 October, the State Council of the People's Republic of China summarised it in a simple sentence: "On the basis of the

5,000 year old culture of China [...] the Chinese people opened the way to socialism with Chinese characteristics."

The world observes China's rise with different expectations as well as admiration and concern. For China's partners, the question of the country's identity also plays a role, regardless of the historical self-image in which it is rooted. They are concerned about whether this new world power has the experience and means to assume the international responsibilities that come with political and economic power.

### **1959: Tibet – Controversial Remembrance**

On 10 March 1959, the "Tibet Uprising" began in Lhasa and cost an estimated 87,000 lives, in the course of which the Dalai Lama fled into exile to India. The uprising was directed against the Chinese presence in Tibet and the annexation by the People's Republic in 1951. In memory of the Tibet Uprising, Tibetans living in exile worldwide celebrate Tibetan Uprising Day on 10 March.

In contrast, the interpretation of the events of March 1959 — a critical moment in Tibet's history, in China, and in the Tibet Autonomous Region, which belongs to China — could hardly be more contradictory. Since 2009, "Serfs Emancipation Day" has been publicly celebrated. It commemorates the expulsion of the Tibetan government by Chinese troops on 28 March 1959 — precisely in reaction to the uprising of the locals that began on 10 March. The Chinese media consistently interpret the complete takeover of government power in Lhasa by China as an act of democratic reform and emancipation. In official terms, Tibet has been a part of China for 700 years. The exact sequence of events and the interpretations thereof are still controversial among Chinese and foreign historians today. For China's official narratives, the preservation of the historical sovereignty of interpretations is a matter of reason of state.

## 1978/79: Reform and Opening Policy – Self-praise for Party and Party Leader

In 1979 something unheard of happened in the planned economy of the real socialism of the PRC: While the purchase prices for agricultural goods were drastically increased, the production cooperatives received extensive management autonomy. The latter measure – adopted on 18 December 1978 at the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP – was to become the official start of the now 40 years of extremely successful system transformation, market economy development, industrialisation, and modernisation of China. As the economy developed, rice and grain production increased to such an extent that the food shortage in the country came to an end. Progress in agriculture led to reforms in other sectors. With the introduction of markets, competition, private enterprise, and the opening up of direct investment, a historically unprecedented growth dynamic arose, which eradicated poverty and ultimately established China's rise as a world power.

Since the beginning of 2018, countless meetings and conferences have commemorated the ground-breaking session of the Third Plenary and celebrated China's four decades of success. Highly acclaimed exhibitions in Beijing and Shenzhen paid homage to the fundamental significance of the events for the preparation and emergence of "Chinese socialism in the new age". Completely unmentioned in public commemorations, however, is the fact that the privatisation of agriculture and the emergence of farmers' markets were spontaneous movements "from below", supported by a rural population that had become disillusioned with Maoist indoctrination and impracticable planned-economy requirements with decreasing levels of state control; they wanted to operate independently again. Also noticeable is the constant emphasis on the unbroken continuity of reform and opening up, which continues to the present day. Neither the interruption

of the reform process (1989–1991), which followed Tiananmen for a time, nor its partial dismantling, which began around 2012, is discussed. The leading role of President Xi as a legitimate and responsible administrator of the reform legacy is specifically emphasised.

On the 40th anniversary, on 18 December 2018, Xi, in his speech to the State Council, praised the decision of the Third Plenum as a turning point in the history of the People's Republic; he placed it in line with the founding of the party (CCP, 1 July 1921) and the state (PRC, 1 October 1949). Xi praised the 40 years of successful reform and opening policies as proof that the party's strategy and leadership were always correct.

There is no doubt that China's historically unprecedented economic growth, which began in 1979, and the social achievements it has made possible deserve recognition. The party, and in particular Deng, who was responsible for implementing the reforms, played an important role in the process. On the other hand, it is hardly tenable that the party's centralist claim to control and leadership is emphasised in such a way. The decentralisation of economic decisions and the creation of material incentives for managers and functionaries at the local level were characteristic and probably decisive for the success of the reform and opening process. While production, investment, and sales decisions were made autonomously, the party secretaries were largely able to draw local tax revenues and decisively determine the orientation of local economic policies. The great achievement of the central level of government consisted rather in the following: It did not resist the wave of privatisation that was spreading, it allowed those at the local level the freedom to experiment with reforms, and it promoted those reforms nationwide, which produced positive results. In addition, it linked the promotion of party and state officials to the levels of growth achieved and did not hamper the reform process with a restrictive central reform strategy.

If the state and the party are once again increasingly centralising the economy and



even entrepreneurial decisions, it is important that the party's claim to control and leadership be seen as a decisive factor in the reform process — but this representation distorts history. The lack of appreciation for the individual contributions of farmers, entrepreneurs, and managers to China's economic rise illustrates the fundamental contrast with the model of the pluralistic Western market economy.

### **1989: 4 June on Tiananmen Square – Remembering and Forgetting**

In 1987, the then-General Secretary of the CCP, Hu Yaobang, was forced to resign: In Deng's eyes, he was too liberal. Hu's death, on 15 April 1989, led to nationwide mourning rallies, which quickly led to a massive protest movement mobilising millions of people in many cities in China, centring on Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Young people, workers, and other citizens called for political, economic, and social reforms: first and foremost the fight against corruption and for more political participation.

On 20 May, the leadership imposed martial law, paving the way for the deployment of the military. During the night of 3 June into the next morning, soldiers massacred Chinese civilians in Beijing, especially in access roads to Tiananmen Square, as they stood in the path of tanks and soldiers. The Chinese Red Cross estimated the number of victims at about 2,600 and counted about 7,000 wounded. There have also been reports of hundreds of victims in other places in China, but the exact figures are unknown; the official death toll is 187. Thousands more demonstrators were imprisoned — often for years — in the days and weeks that followed. Some fled abroad and keep the memory of the bloody suppression alive.

After 4 June, Deng's goal was to quickly return to normality, that is, economic development and solid political control of the country. Left-wing opponents of Deng's economic reform policy saw the opportunity to blame all policies and the pragmatism of

“reform and openness” on the neglect of Marxist principles, which did not suit them in Deng's politics. Deng himself saw another danger: the internal disruption of the party by those who advocated political reforms — similar to what happened in the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev. Dealing with the uprising for too long seemed to jeopardise a return to Deng's policy of controlled economic reform. Any discussion of 4 June was prevented. Even the first narrative of a defeated counter-revolution was quickly silenced.

Unlike hardly any other event in the last 30 years, the brutal end of the protests has shaped the CCP, external perceptions of the People's Republic, and the handling of dissent and criticism within the party and the country. For the Chinese leadership, however, the silence over the Tiananmen incidents is part of the success of its policy: “After the incident, the Chinese government followed the line of not discussing it, no matter what the West said. China's attitude helped the country to quickly leave the crisis behind and to achieve rapid economic development.” Since in China all reports about the events of 1989 are censored, the majority of the population is not really aware either of the actions of the CCP in Tiananmen Square or of its importance for the internal development and external perceptions of the country. Today, digital censorship in China means that only traces remain of the memories of witnesses. The “Mothers of Tiananmen Square”, who want to preserve the memories of their murdered children and bring those responsible to justice, cannot express themselves publicly. In April of this year, some students in Sichuan province were sentenced to several years in jail when they secretly discussed the suppression of the Tiananmen protests.

Tiananmen still holds a dual symbolism today: on the one hand, for an alternative democratic development path of China that has not (yet) been followed; on the other hand, for the numerous human rights violations, which have been an essential component of the authoritarian rule of the CCP since the founding of the PRC. In the Xi Jin-

ping era, people can only express dissent individually, and they risk being persecuted for it. Any form of collective political mobilisation, whether in the form of organisations or demonstrations, has become impossible outside the control of the CCP. Therefore, Hong Kong is currently the only place in the PRC where it is feared that the military could be deployed on a large scale: Only there can people still protest freely – thanks to its still ongoing special status under the designation “One country, two systems”.

Hong Kong has a strong culture of remembrance relating to 4 June. Fugitive dissidents from the People’s Republic who escaped the Chinese army at that time now live here. The precarious situation of the Special Administrative Zone also keeps the memory of Tiananmen alive. By gradually reducing Hong Kong’s remaining autonomy, its population sees the violence of a government that was responsible for Tiananmen 30 years ago coming closer. This explains in part the protest movement, which, in the early summer of 2019, ignited over a bill to extradite suspected criminals to the PRC. The protests continue undiminished to this day. They are primarily directed against Beijing’s increasing role in the everyday lives of residents in Hong Kong.

China’s way is to enforce forgetting. Deng suppressed any commemorations of the victims of 4 June unless they were exclusively private. He thus created a space for himself to keep the ideologues in check while continuing the policy of economic reform. In doing so, he set China on the path it is today. Many sacrifices have been made to the purpose of advancement. The memory of 4 June 1989 is one of them.

## History As a Construct

China’s handling of its anniversaries and public commemorations in 2019 shows very different, complementary approaches.

History is hidden, as is the apparent massacre of 4 June around Tiananmen Square. What is less obvious is that the official May

Fourth commemoration ignores the demands for democratisation and modernisation in the May Fourth Movement and fails to recognise the people’s contributions to the success of the Chinese reform process.

History is instrumentalised, interpreted, and reinterpreted. The interpretation that the May Fourth Movement was essentially nationalist and a predecessor of the CCP is very one-sided, if not a misinterpretation of the events of 1919. Even the glorification of China’s growth successes over the last four decades, due to the party’s centralised control and leadership, does not do justice to the reality of the reform process. Last but not least, China’s official view of Tibet hardly corresponds to the historical facts.

Finally, the politicisation of history is comprehensive, going beyond the establishment of historical narratives. By resorting to China’s imperial past, the recurring question about the historical identity of the People’s Republic is today answered in a nationalistic way. The system of Chinese socialism and the current political rise of the country are in harmony with China’s civilisation and history, which provides self-assurance internally while conveying a powerful propaganda message externally. History becomes an instrument of power and foreign policy.

China’s historical narrative thus has a direct impact on German and European foreign policy. The number of issues that are considered to be sensitive for the Chinese government is increasing; control over historiography is an example of this. Beijing expects not only its own population but also its foreign partners to follow the Chinese narratives, with all of the ramifications and evaluations, be it the “5,000 years” of Chinese history, the “always peaceful” character of China, or the PRC’s ownership claims in the South China Sea. Companies operating in China may be penalised for using a philosophical quote from the Dalai Lama in their advertising; academics working in the country must adapt. If China is now systematically ignoring the struggles over democracy and human rights that have taken place in the course of



its history, it will be even more difficult to reach agreement with its partners.

German and European politicians must prepare themselves for the fact that a China that no longer discusses its own historical mistakes, such as the massive human rights violations of the Mao era and the Tiananmen massacre, will possibly make the same mistakes again — but now with the assertiveness of a world power. Germany should emphasise the diversity of Chinese history and also refer to Chinese models when referring to democracy and human rights, such as the May Fourth Movement and the 1989 Democracy Movement. Germany should also point not only to current but also historical human rights violations, which often have the same origins as the Communist Party's absolute claim to power.

© Stiftung Wissenschaft  
und Politik, 2020  
**All rights reserved**

This Comment reflects  
the authors' views.

The online version of  
this publication contains  
functioning links to other  
SWP texts and other relevant  
sources.

SWP Comments are subject  
to internal peer review, fact-  
checking and copy-editing.  
For further information on  
our quality control pro-  
cedures, please visit the SWP  
website: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/about-swp/quality-management-for-swp-publications/>

#### **SWP**

Stiftung Wissenschaft und  
Politik  
German Institute for  
International and  
Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
[www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)  
[swp@swp-berlin.org](mailto:swp@swp-berlin.org)

ISSN 1861-1761  
doi: 10.18449/2020C04

(English version  
of SWP-Aktuell 70/2019)

*Dr Hanns Günther Hilpert is Head of the Asia Division at SWP.  
Dr Frédéric Krumbein is Heinrich-Heine Visiting Professor at Tel Aviv University  
Former Ambassador Dr Volker Stanzel is a Senior Distinguished Fellow in the Asia Division at SWP.*