

# Understanding ‘Red Memory’ in Contemporary China

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*“All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed as often as was necessary.”*  
— George Orwell, 1984

## I. Introduction

What influences how citizens form memories of the political past and what are the implications of historical memory for contemporary public opinion? To this day, the Chinese government has maintained a conflicted relationship with the legacy of the Maoist era and the image of Mao. As is well known, Deng Xiaoping’s regime repudiated the Cultural Revolution and Mao’s cult of personality within the first few years after taking power. In 1979, the Party terminated the circulation of “the little red book,” the iconic symbol of the Cultural Revolution and the deification of Mao (Yang 2016, 166). A July 1980 directive indirectly called for the destruction of Maoist paraphernalia: “Chairman Mao badges are to be recalled and recycled wherever possible so as to prevent the excessive waste of metal” (Terrill 1993). Then, in the historic 1981 “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China,” the Party declared the Cultural Revolution as the greatest setback experienced by the country since the founding of the PRC. Yet despite the denunciation of the Cultural Revolution and the acknowledgment of Mao’s role in its initiation, the 1981 Resolution separated the excesses of the Cultural Revolution from Mao Zedong Thought:

These erroneous ‘Left’ theses, upon which Comrade Mao Zedong based himself in initiating the Cultural Revolution, were obviously inconsistent with the system of Mao Zedong Thought, which is the integration of the universal principles of Marxism-Leninism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution.

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These theses must be clearly distinguished from Mao Zedong Thought (“Resolution on Certain Questions,” 1981).

Fearing the possible political ramifications of repudiating Mao and his legacy, Deng, echoing Mao’s appraisal of Stalin, declared that Mao’s merits outweighed his faults.

Still, the memory of Mao and the Maoist era has loomed large in the Chinese popular imagination, most notably in the form of Maoist nostalgia. Scholars have noted the rise of Maoist nostalgia in the 1990s (Yang 2003; Terrill 1993). Terrill (1993) writes of the wave of “Mao fever” (毛热) that washed over the country in the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown. Yang (2003) notes the peculiar shift from the “scar literature” of the late-1970s and 1980s to the Red Guard nostalgia of the 1990s. Reflecting on the source of this nostalgia, Terrill (1993) observes that “[t]here arose nostalgia and admiration for Mao on the part of a fresh generation that reflected disappointment with Deng during the late 1980s and disgust at corruption among the top Communist leaders.” Maoist nostalgia manifested in popular culture in the form of Chairman Mao impersonators, as Yu Hua vividly documented in his book *China In Ten Words*, and in the many temples and ancestral halls dedicated to Mao that locals have built in cities and the countryside alike.

In recent years, Mao’s image and rhetoric have reemerged with renewed fervor, often to the consternation of authorities. Before his dramatic ouster in February 2012, Bo Xilai, a powerful political scion and Party Secretary of Chongqing, alarmed the Hu-Wen administration by combining his state-centric developmental policies with an aggressive Maoist populism. His “sing red, strike black” campaign (唱红打黑), which rallied citizens to sing old Maoist songs while advocating a crackdown on organized crime, and his decision to send Chongqing officials down to the countryside to learn from the peasants prompted the Western media to declare that a veritable “Maoist revival” had emerged in Chongqing (Hille 2011). In January 2016, a giant

gold-painted Mao statue was erected in the countryside of Henan province, eliciting a range of positive and negative public responses regarding the legacies of the Maoist era; in the wake of this media firestorm, the government ordered the statue's demolition for "lacking official approval" (McKirdy and Lu 2016). Even President Xi Jinping has praised Mao Zedong thought; his style of governance and burgeoning cult of personality, including his wearing of high-wasted pants, have been compared to Mao by many observers (Beech 2016).

Why have Chinese citizens formed different kinds of "red memory" (红色记忆), with some people waxing nostalgic for the Maoist past and Mao's leadership? What is the character of Maoist nostalgia and does it play any role in how citizens understand or think about politics and society today? On the basis of 77 intensive semi-structured interviews conducted in Hangzhou, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Zhengzhou, we draw several conclusions about red memory and Maoist nostalgia in contemporary China. First, the way in which red memory forms varies between older and younger generations: the lived experiences of older people during the Maoist era appear to determine their affinity for the past; while younger people tend to form their opinions of the Maoist era almost independently from the lived experiences of their parents and grandparents, as the intergenerational transfer of memory is conspicuously absent in China, and rely instead on official historical memories communicated through the education system and Party propaganda. Second, red memory is bifurcated into separate evaluations of the Maoist era and of Mao as an individual leader, which reflects the official pronouncements of the 1981 Party resolution on Party history. Third, Maoist nostalgia, where it exists, is best described as "reflective nostalgia" (Boym 2001), as it acknowledges the material progress made since 1978 and focuses instead on an imagined pure or wholesome "spiritual" (精神) life that has been sadly lost in the perceived hyper-materialist moral vacuum of the reform period. Lastly, Maoist

nostalgia appears to be correlated with attitudes towards corruption. Here we identify two groups of respondents: nostalgic hardliners and critical reformers. Nostalgic hardliners exhibit strong reflective nostalgia and are more supportive of the current anti-corruption campaign and even more punitive measures to curb corruption; meanwhile, critical reformers are not at all nostalgic for the Maoist era and are much more critical of the anti-corruption campaign, favoring more systemic political reform.

## **II. The Politics and Formation of Collective “Red” Memory in Contemporary China**

Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, the academic study of communist nostalgia has blossomed within the humanities (Todorova 2012), but these concepts of historical memory, nostalgia, and trauma have been of marginal interest to social scientists.<sup>3</sup> Research on collective action in China has paid particular attention to Maoist nostalgia among former or current beneficiaries of the Maoist state-owned factory system. These laid-off workers and pensioners not only tend to express nostalgia for the Maoist era, they even utilize Maoist nostalgia as a weapon of resistance against factory layoffs and local corruption (Cai 2002; Hurst and O’Brien 2002; Lee 2000, 2007). The bulk of research on Chinese public opinion, however, has avoided the issue of red memory and instead relied mainly on observational data to document differences in public opinion across demographic groups and towards different levels of the government (Chen 2004; Kennedy 2009; Lewis-Beck et al 2013; Li 2013; Saich 2011; Whyte 2010). Though it is clear that red memory, and Maoist nostalgia in particular, exists in China, it is unclear how this memory forms and what its implications are for Chinese politics today.

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<sup>3</sup> For notable exceptions, see Alexander (2012); Lee (2000, 2007); Lee and Yang (2007); O’Brien and Li (1999); Olick (1999); Olick and Levy (1997); and Yang (2003, 2016).

How do historical memories form and why do they become sources of nostalgia or trauma? Existing research suggests that lived experience, the intergenerational transfer of memory, current socioeconomic standing, and contemporary political context can all affect how a historical memory takes shape.

One possible, albeit obvious, factor in the formation of red memory is one's lived experience or the lived experiences of one's parents and grandparents. Experiences from one's adolescence may be particularly important; Davis (1979) argues that adolescence is the critical period for the formation of memory. For older generations, the nature of one's lived experience significantly affects how it is remembered, though the relationship between the objective reality of an experienced and how it is remembered may be quite convoluted. Having benefited from or avoided suffering during the Maoist era may be conducive to the formation of red nostalgia. Yet having suffered in the Maoist era does not necessarily prevent one from becoming nostalgic. Yang (2003) finds that the generation of sent-down youth (知青) express nostalgic for their time in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, despite the many hardships it entailed, because of how their memories served as badges of martyrdom or sacrifice. He writes:

[T]he reflection on past sufferings typically leads to a feeling of exaltation. It is caused not by the sufferings per se but by the ability of the generation to undergo these sufferings with courage or resignation and a mixed sense of sacrifice and achievement. To the extent that the authors of these narratives shared in these past sufferings, such exaltation is a celebration of the self (Yang 2003, 283).

The collective experience of going down to the countryside in one's adolescence and the significant, though not extreme, hardship entailed may make the nostalgia of the sent-down youth an exception to the hypothetical link between lived experience and memory formation. After all, those who endured extreme political persecution, such as intellectuals and the offspring and those with bad class labels, may have little reason to see their suffering in nostalgic and heroic terms, especially in the absence of the collective experience of being sent down.

While historical memory may be rooted in lived experience for older generations, the memory of the past must be transferred intergenerationally, through family or education, to younger generations who can only “remember” the past indirectly. Existing research shows strong evidence for intergenerational transmission of political ideology and social beliefs: values and worldviews can be passed down from parents to children (Duriez and Soenens 2009, Jennings et al 2009; Moen et al 1997). In the case of “red memories” in China, it can be hypothesized that the younger generations’ beliefs about the political past may be influenced by tales told by their parents. In the absence of intergenerational memory transfer, we could assume that education is the major source of historical memory for the young.

One’s socioeconomic status in the present can also alter one’s opinion of the past. As Walter Benjamin (1968, 255) remarked, “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’” In psychology, this phenomenon of memory “bias” occurs because people evaluate the past based on how they feel in the present—that is, people are prone to believe that how they felt in the past and how they feel now about a certain event has never changed (Schacter 2001). In China, we may conjecture that the rich, as beneficiaries of the economic reforms, may conceivably be less nostalgic for the past and more satisfied with the present. There is no existing research, to our knowledge, on how current socioeconomic status affects historical memory in China, though there is mixed evidence for the role of current socioeconomic standing in satisfaction with the present. Though some research on income and political support in China shows that the rich are more likely to support the government than the poor (Chen and Dickson 2008, Lewis-Beck et al. 2013, Tsai 2007), other studies observe no such correlation (Li 2004). Whyte (2010), in fact, finds that rural residents exhibit the highest levels of

satisfaction with the reforms and economic inequality, despite their disadvantaged position in the reform economy.<sup>4</sup>

Political context may also shape the formation of memory. Olick (1999, 342) observes that “[p]owerful institutions clearly value some histories more than others, provide narrative patterns and exemplars of how individuals can and should remember, and stimulate memory in ways and for reasons that have nothing to do with the individual or aggregate neurological records.” For example, nation-states manage historical memory as a part of the process of constructing and shaping national identity (Edkins 2003). These different state-provided frames can change the valence of memories through a process psychologists call “suggestibility,” where the framing of the past influences how one “remembers” it (Schacter 2001). Jeffrey Alexander (2012) asserts that the memory of trauma, which one would assume is rooted in the objective experience of a traumatic event, may in fact only be remembered as trauma in certain political contexts. For example, he argues that the Nanjing Massacre did not become a collective traumatic memory in China until the reform era, when the Party had more of a reason to deemphasize conflict with Taiwan and instead rally anti-Japanese nationalism. Individuals may also have political reasons for remembering the past in a certain way. Yang (2016) argues that the memories of the Cultural Revolution are “factionalized” along old factional lines from the Cultural Revolution era, particularly in regards to how different factions believe memories of the past will implicate or absolve certain factions.

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<sup>4</sup> Whyte (2010) argues that the low level of relative inequality in the countryside compared to within cities and the improvement in rural life since the Maoist era, he argues, may explain this acceptance of the economic status quo.

### III. Research Design

To explore the formation and implications of red memory, we conducted 43 intensive semi-structured interviews in 2016 with Chinese citizens of various ages and socioeconomic backgrounds in Shanghai and Hangzhou (see Appendix for the interview guide). It is often assumed that interviewees, especially survey respondents, in authoritarian regimes will provide what they consider politically safe answers when stating their true beliefs might jeopardize them. We chose intensive semi-structured interviews as our method for this project in order to overcome this problem. Intensive interviews allow the interviewer to observe the interviewee and infer the authenticity of his/her answer based on his/her gestures, facial expressions and emotions. Semi-structured interviews allow interviewers to ask follow up questions at any point in order to estimate the stability of the interviewee's beliefs and the logic behind his/her thinking.

Because of the political sensitivity of this topic, we used a snowball sampling technique to locate and interview subjects through a chain-referral process. We do not claim that this is a representative sample. However, a representative sample is not critical to this paper since its purpose is to understand the process behind the formation of red memory and its potential role in the formation of contemporary political opinion. We did, however, maintain a balance in interviewees' demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Half of the interviewees were female. 40% of interviewees were below the age of 45, including 6 high school students. 42% interviewees attended college, including 12% who attained master's or doctorate degrees. Interviewees also come from a variety of occupations, including teachers, civil servants, layers, entrepreneurs, laid-off workers, homemakers and retirees. Table 1 presents summary statistics for the interviewees.

*Table 1. Summary Statistics for Interviewees*

Age	40% below 45 60% above 45
Gender	50% female 50% male
Highest Level of Educational Attainment	2% below high school 56% high school 30% college 12% master's degree or above.

#### **IV. The Formation and Bifurcation of Red Memory**

The structure of red memory is surprisingly similar across age cohorts and is clearly bifurcated between memories of the Maoist era and memories of Mao as an individual leader. This bifurcation of red memory resembles the way in which the 1981 Resolution separated Mao as a revolutionary leader from his actions as a ruler. Conversely, we find that the process behind the formation of red memory varies across age cohorts, while its structure does not. For older generations—those who were able to form conscious memories during the Maoist experience (over 45 years old)—the formation of historical memory depends largely on the nature of their lived experiences: these respondents exhibited some degree of nostalgia if they had avoided significant trauma during the Maoist period. The lived experiences of one's parents or grandparents, however, bears little on how younger generations form their memories of the Maoist past in the absence of official or unofficial channels to facilitate the intergenerational transfer of memory. Instead, official memories of the Maoist era populate the political imagination of younger respondents; most of these memories are spread through the education system and CCP propaganda.

*Forming Red Memory: The Role of Lived Experience and Official Memory among Older and Younger Generations*

Lived experience featured prominently in how older subjects formed their memory of the Maoist past. An interesting comparison comes from two neighbors in Shanghai. Both pensioners in a similar socioeconomic position, one had been a factory worker and red guard in the Maoist period while the other was a former government official who had been politically taken down during the Cultural Revolution. For the retired worker, he remembered fondly the equality and stability of factory life, where everyone made roughly the same salary and where one's work unit provided everything for their workers. A particularly distinct memory was his trip to Beijing to see Chairman Mao, whom he deeply respects, in Tiananmen Square during the Cultural Revolution. He said, "If you want to know why people still respect Chairman Mao today, it is because there were no special privileges (特权) back then. Chairman Mao emphasized honest and clean politics (廉政), not just economic development" (Interview MN07). His neighbor, however, was far more critical of the Maoist period:

Mao didn't understand economics... Things were good if you were a worker, but not if you were a peasant or an intellectual. The Great Leap Forward killed millions, the Anti-Rightist Campaign devastated China's intellectual class, and the Cultural Revolution was, in the Party's own words, a ten-year catastrophe (Interview MN08).

He was especially upset that the government to this day has stymied efforts to establish museums about the Cultural Revolution. Mao, he concluded, was nothing more than a "Marxist-speaking Qin Shihuang" (Interview MN08).

The quality of lived experiences in the Maoist era appears connected to nostalgia among middle-aged respondents as well. A 48 year-old civil servant who grew up on a military base described it as "a harmonious and happy environment [where] the army supplied us with everything." He acknowledged the material poverty of the Maoist era, but he praised its equality and, overall, thought favorably of Mao: "He was one of the most outstanding leaders in China's

history. His superior military talents, his profound thought, and his deep knowledge of Chinese literature has, to this day, been surpassed by no one” (Interview MN09). Alternatively, a 51 year-old auction house owner, the son of landlords, was not at all nostalgic for the Maoist era:

My parents were locked up in the cowshed [during the Cultural Revolution]; and I almost could not receive an education. We had trouble getting clothing and food because our family wealth was confiscated. My childhood was truly grey and I weep bitterly when I think about it. I had so few friends and my classmates would not play with me because my family’s class background was so bad (Interview MN24).

Younger age cohorts who did not personally experience the Maoist era—that is, those under 45 years of age—must rely on the intergenerational transfer of personal memories from their relatives or official historical narratives taught in school to “remember” the Maoist past. However, we find that the intergenerational transfer of memory in China is particularly weak: only about 25 percent of young respondents say that their relatives have spoken to them about their experiences in the Maoist era. Rather, it appears that official historical narratives and Party propaganda about Mao, much of which focused on his personal life, loom large in the historical memory of China’s youth.

In the absence of the intergenerational transfer of memory, many young respondents, when asked about the Maoist era, responded with “textbook” accounts of the period; when asked about Mao, they provided answers taken straight out of the official Party history. They almost all referred to the Cultural Revolution as a chaotic and terrible era, though they also note that Mao, while responsible, was likely “influenced by Jiang Qing,” a standard argument in the Party’s official account of the period. One young college graduate mentioned that her parents told her little about their experiences in the Maoist period, though she knew that they did not have a positive opinion of it. She says:

It was an exciting but horrifying era. Many people deify Mao and think of him as a savior. But I cannot relate to or understand it. Secondly, the Cultural Revolution was horrifying because you could be killed for saying one thing wrong...[Mao] liberated China. But it was chaotic after the Cultural Revolution, maybe because he got older, but more so because he was influenced by others such as Jiang Qing (Interview MN04).

Her opinion on the Maoist era appears to be drawn mainly from the official account that condemned the Cultural Revolution, attributed blame to the Gang of Four, and criticized Mao's leftism in the final years of his life. Instead of talking about the Maoist era itself, younger respondents focus instead on Mao, though again with tropes taken from official histories. They emphasize his military achievements in the War of Resistance Against the Japanese, his refined poetry, and his excellence as a leader; and they also point out his "leftist thought" in his latter years and the chaotic period of the Cultural Revolution (Interviews MN04, MN12, MN13). This focus on Mao instead of the concrete events of the Maoist era appears even where one would expect there to be rich sources of historical memory. For example, despite growing up in a major revolutionary base area before moving to Shanghai, an entrepreneur in his late-twenties says that he did not hear many stories about Mao growing up, though he remembers seeing many images of him swimming in the Yangtze river and eating red-braised meat (红烧肉) (Interview MN06). Another student who has spent a considerable amount of time studying abroad said that his grandfather, who fought against the Japanese, would tell him many stories about the war and life in the Maoist era. While it appears that this young man was one of the few young people who was influenced by the memories of his relatives' experiences in the Maoist period, when discussing his understanding of the Cultural Revolution he referred only to what he "read in books" about how it was a time in which people blindly believed everything Mao told them. Not just his parents but also his teachers, he said, shaped his understanding of the past (Interview MN30).

*Bifurcated Memory: Separating the Maoist Era from Mao as Leader*

Red memory is strikingly bifurcated between criticism of the excesses of the Maoist era and admiration for Mao as a leader. Equal numbers of interviewees viewed the Maoist era as mostly positive or mostly negative (42 percent each), while 16 percent were neutral. Conversely, 60 percent of respondents saw Mao in mostly positive terms, another 15 percent held a neutral opinion, and only 25 percent viewed Mao negatively. Those who praise both the Maoist era and Mao still admit that he erred, to some extent, after 1949, but they do not find these errors grave enough to tarnish Mao's legacy as a great leader; and many respondents who viewed the Maoist era unfavorably still maintained a positive or at least mixed impression of Mao himself. This differentiation between the Maoist era and Mao the leader mirrors the official 1981 Resolution account of the Maoist era, which distinguished between the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and the other excesses of the Maoist era and Mao himself. The ability to compartmentalize this image of Mao and the events that occurred during his reign appears to preserve the purity of Mao's image as a great revolutionary.

Most respondents freely admitted that Mao had made mistakes during his rule but that these mistakes were dwarfed by his greatness as a leader. A retired factory worker, who was nostalgic for the economy stability and political purity of the Maoist era, conceded that many people were hurt during the Maoist era; however, he asserts that Mao himself was a great leader who “dared” (敢) to do things that today's leaders would not. He also admires Mao for advocating austerity and for wearing patched-up clothing and slippers (Interview MN07). A 70-year-old retiree and former editor similarly distinguished between Mao and the Maoist era:

Mao Zedong was a founding father and a great proletarian revolutionary. His accomplishments will surpass anyone in a thousand years. [What he did] after the founding of the country, especially the mistakes of his later years, cannot erase his great contributions to China. Mao Zedong was one of the rare great people of Chinese and world history! Mao Zedong's poetry was of unmatched excellence. To this day, the lyrics ‘the East is Red, the sun rises, China produces a Mao Zedong’ still plays in my heart. However, even the

greatest people cannot be without fault, I do not agree with some of the political movements that Mao Zedong launched, especially the Cultural Revolution, which I believe is a mistake that created a disaster for China (Interview MN20).

Despite his sharp disapproval of the Cultural Revolution, he did not feel that Mao's errors could negate his impressive contributions to China, as no great leader can be perfect. For him, the legacy of Mao as an individual cannot and should not be evaluated alongside the legacy of the Maoist era. A middle-aged civil servant who praised Mao's leadership capabilities echoed this sentiment, "Although he made mistakes during his rule, his contributions far outstrip his faults. His glorious achievements (丰功伟绩) will forever be recorded in the annals of history" (Interview MN09). For some respondents, Mao's "leftist mistakes" actually contributed to their positive image of him. A Shanghainese college student and Party member studying abroad argued that the Cultural Revolution was not necessarily a terrible thing, as it evinced the strength and magnetism of Mao's leadership (Interview MN30).

Shockingly, even those who suffered during the Maoist era—and were critical of and not nostalgic for the past—spoke favorably of Mao as a leader. It appears that these respondents, though they admit the prevalence of poverty in the Maoist era, still credit Mao for providing for them and setting the foundation for the country's success. A 57 year-old policeman spoke extensively about the poverty of his youth. "Ah, the era before the reform and opening," he exclaimed, "Poverty! Bitterness! When I was little I never had enough to eat...I ate wild grass, even tree leaves!" Yet he goes on to praise Mao as "a great man [who] liberated all of China and made it possible for us to eat. He laid the foundation for the country's future development and was our great savior" (Interview MN23). A retired textile worker, when reflecting on the Maoist era, replied, "One word: bitterness." He then argued that Mao was a great leader who suffered much himself, presumably on behalf of building the country (Interview MN27). Perhaps the most surprising example of this bifurcated memory comes from the aforementioned middle-aged

auction house owner, who said that he wept bitterly whenever thinking about the political persecution and desolation of his childhood. Despite having a miserable childhood due to his family's landlord class label, he still argued that Mao was a great—though merciless—leader. “Based on how my life turned out,” he remarked, “I have to thank him” (Interview MN24).

For a minority of respondents, however, this extreme idolization of Chairman Mao contradicted the historical record and was too excessive. A 67 year-old laid-off state worker passionately conveyed negative impression of Mao, “The older he got the sillier he became. Today he struggles against this person; tomorrow he struggles against another person. History proves everything” (Interview MN03). A twenty year-old student lamented, “Mao Zedong is an overly deified hero with Chinese characteristics who is printed on [our] money, written into books, and engraved into our memories.” (Interview MN05). Nevertheless, these critical views were well in the minority. Though one may question whether respondents self-censored when talking about Mao, that more respondents were willing to speak out against the Maoist era than Mao suggests that they did not shy away from criticism but rather evaluated Mao and the Maoist era separately.

## **V. Reflective Nostalgia and Contemporary Politics**

The way in which many respondents evaluate Mao and the Maoist era typifies what Svetlana Boym calls “reflective nostalgia.” Unlike “restorative nostalgia,” which aims at recreating the past in the present, “[r]eflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance...[it] lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time” (Boym 2001, 41). Accordingly, Maoist nostalgia romanticizes certain elements of the past, but it does not yearn for its restoration; it ponders and

considers, from the material comfort of the present, the loss of a (perceived) spiritually fulfilling and more genuine life in the Maoist period. The lack of a desire for restoration of the Maoist past is evident from the fact that the vast majority of respondents claim to be satisfied with their present lives. We discern no link between current dissatisfaction and nostalgia for the past, and all respondents say that life today, in material terms, is better than it was in the Maoist era. Still, these positive evaluations of the present did not prevent nearly 30 percent of respondents from expressing some degree of nostalgia for the past, and even higher proportions of respondents from providing positive accounts of the Maoist era and Mao.

What explains this simultaneous acceptance of the present and romanticization of the past is that Maoist nostalgia focuses mainly on the “spiritual” (精神) dimension of life more so than the relative material comforts of everyday living. Instead, Maoist nostalgia appears to function as a critique of the speed, uncertainty, and perceived moral degradation of the reform era. Nostalgic respondents focus on the loss of a purer, more innocent time characterized by more stability and certainty as well as closer community ties, trust, and a general spirit of cooperation. This dovetails with Boym’s argument that nostalgia is a reaction to the stresses of modernity:

In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time as space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. Hence the ‘past of nostalgia,’ to paraphrase Faulkner, is not ‘even the past.’ It could merely be another time, or slower time. Time out of time, not encumbered by appointment books (Boym 2001, xv).

This simultaneous focus on the richness of spiritual life and material poverty in the Maoist era leads to a nuanced red memory that reconciles, at times uneasily, the positive and negative aspects of life in the Maoist and reform eras.

A major theme of Maoist nostalgia is the idea of a more honest and certain world; this is almost always contrasted with the perceived moral depravity of contemporary society. “The economy was difficult [in Mao’s time],” a retired 65 year-old worker remarked, “but it was

spiritually better... There is too much fake stuff today, you have to worry about pollution, fake products, fake food. You didn't have those problems then" (Interview MN07). Similarly, a 64 year-old female retiree reminisced: "In the past, we had good public security, and people were honest. Nowadays swindlers are everywhere. People have become cold-hearted. When you help others, sometimes they don't even say thank you" (Interview MN02). A 70 year-old male retiree marveled at the tremendous trust and faith people had in the Party:

During the three years of natural disaster [the Great Leap Famine]—that's when I was in middle school—life was quite hard, but at that time the Chinese people had an unswerving loyalty to the Party and firmly believed that they could get through the crisis. So not only did this period of hardship leave a deep impression on me, so did the spirit of a people who firmly believed that they could survive a crisis together (Interview MN20).

He went on to praise the lack of corruption and the stability of society in the Maoist era, and the friendliness and strong spirit of people back then.

This contrast between a bygone innocent and morally upright world and a heartless and depraved present may simply be the product of romanticization of the past by older generations; however, many young respondents described the Maoist era in these terms as well. Although the Maoist era, for most young people, conjured up images of poverty, it also brought to mind a much simpler and slower pace of life and a much more innocent, idealistic, and trusting society. A twenty-year old student thought that life was definitely better now economically, but that "emotional ties are not as intimate today as before; today people do not know their neighbors. People were more pure and naïve [in the past]." He also argued that life was simpler back then because, as long as you were part of the "glorious" (光荣) worker class, you could enjoy a stable job and benefits (Interview MN05). Another student said:

People trusted each other and relationships between strangers were good; people didn't doubt each other... Trust was better back then, and people were more simple, in a good way. There was an idea of 'unity is strength' (团结就是力量). It's harder to lead people today (Interview M30).

For him, a key feature of the Maoist era was that, despite their material poverty, people could still lead happy, satisfying lives:

People were happier because their spiritual world (精神世界) wasn't based on money...My parents had less pressure and could enjoy their lives. People didn't feel the need to chase money. Today, people can make half a million RMB and still think they need to make a million more (Interview M30).

One twenty-something entrepreneur likened the economy of the Maoist era to present-day North Korea, but noted that the pace of life was slower back then and people were more pure (单纯) and less likely to cheat (欺骗) others (Interview MN06).

These accounts of Maoist nostalgia indicate that those who are nostalgic for the Maoist era do not seek to restore it and instead use it as a way of reflecting on the many anxieties of the everyday life in China today. Interviewees unanimously believed that things were, materially, much better today, and only rarely did they discount the material comforts of today when reminiscing about the past. One retired worker remarked, “Yes we worried about not having enough to eat [back then], but it wasn't that bad...you could get everything you needed from the state. Today people have to spend all of their money on the three ‘bottomless pits’ (三个无底洞) of school, healthcare, and real estate” (Interview MN07).

### *The Implications of Maoist Nostalgia for Contemporary Public Opinion*

Are there implications of Maoist nostalgia that go beyond merely reflecting on the anxieties of modern life—that is, does this kind of reflective nostalgia have any connection with how citizens view contemporary political and social issues in China? In this final section, we present evidence that Maoist nostalgia appears to be related to how Chinese citizens feel about corruption, though it has little bearing on how they think about the state's role in economic development or socioeconomic inequality. Here we make a distinction between “critical

reformers”—those who are not nostalgic for the Maoist era and advocate legal systemic reform as a solution to corruption—and “nostalgic hardliners”—those who are nostalgic for the perceived lack of corruption in the Maoist era and are more supportive of the anti-corruption campaign and its intensification as a solution to corruption.

Table 2 presents a breakdown of the political opinions of our 30 interviewees in various issues areas by their expressed level of nostalgia. Nostalgic and non-nostalgic interviewees expressed similar views on the role of the state in economic development, the severity of inequality, and support for government intervention in solving inequality. On the other hand, a majority of nostalgic interviewees believed that Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign is effective and a sizeable proportion believes it has not gone far enough. Non-nostalgic interviewees, however, tend to be far more critical of the effectiveness of this campaign, seeing it as an empty political ploy and recommending systemic political and legal reform as an alternative solution.

*Table 2. Political Opinions of Nostalgic and Non-Nostalgic Interviewees by Issue Area*

<b>Issue Area</b>	<b>Nostalgic Interviewees</b>	<b>Non-Nostalgic Interviewees</b>
Advocate State-led Economy	20%	14.3%
Believe Inequality is Serious Issue	83.3%	85.7%
Support Government Intervention to Solve Inequality	75%	71.4%
Believe in Effectiveness of Anti-Corruption Campaign	61.5%	16.7%
Believe Anti-Corruption Campaign Needs to be Intensified	40%	0%

Nostalgic hardliners are just as likely as critical reformers to believe that corruption is a serious issue, but they tend to use the Maoist past as a comparison point to underscore the

severity of corruption today as well as the need more vigorous anti-corruption measures. A retired worker complained bitterly about corruption, especially since he came from a family of police officers. He believed that Mao was a good role model for a leader because he sent his own son to war; he criticized Deng and other top leaders' for sending their children into business. As for the anti-corruption campaign, he argued that Xi's campaign was not radical enough and need to be intensified. He said, "Isn't the Party supposed to serve the people? Now it's the people serving the Party. [In Mao's time] you used to be able to report people and they would be punished" (Interview MN07). A young respondent, who was not nostalgic himself, recalled his daily lunches with his uncle, who was an extreme nostalgic hardliner:

He keeps the little red book at home. He thinks corrupt officials did not exist in the past. He was a peasant-turned-worker, [but] his current situation is not as good compared to life in the past and the lives of those around him (such as my mom who is a civil servant). He is very dissatisfied with current politics. When I was young I often heard him saying that 'everyone says workers are the backbone of revolution, but today...' (Interview MN29).

A student who expressed a certain degree of nostalgia for the Maoist period was generally supportive of Xi's campaign:

What Xi is doing is quite good. It sets a good example for others who need to realize that corruption is not a 'natural' thing and is illegal. What [Xi] is trying to do is change the image of the government. It has kind of worked: if you give someone a red envelope (红包) they'll say 'no, no, no, it's ok.' People realize that [being corrupt] is a problem...The campaign can't solve corruption but I hope it will. One generation can't change the whole thing. [The anti-corruption campaign] is good for younger generations because they will learn that corruption is bad (Interview MN30).

He added that once attitudes start changing then the campaign can be pushed harder. A striking commonality between the responses of nostalgic hardliners is that none of them called for radical political reform as a solution to corruption; rather, they suggested either intensifying the current anti-corruption campaign or strengthening internal Party discipline and supervision.

Critical reformers are far less convinced of the efficacy of Xi's anti-corruption campaign and they do not view the Maoist era as an ideal period devoid of corruption. One Shanghainese retiree acknowledged that Mao was good at fighting corruption and that corruption scandals back

then pale in comparison to those today, though he considered Mao to be a tyrant. He criticized Deng Xiaoping for failing to reform the political system and believed that what China needs today is political reform that implements constitutional law (Interview MN08). A college student temporarily living in Shanghai was not only highly critical of the Maoist era but also of the current anti-corruption campaign. The campaign, in his view, is arresting and punishing those who are not careful and is probably just a cover for factional politics; he believes it is a way for Xi to attack his enemy factions. Nothing will change without significant legal reform, he contended. He also dismissed the idea that the Maoist era was any less corrupt: “If there was less corruption in the Maoist era, it was because there weren’t a lot of [economic] opportunities to be corrupt” (Interview MN05). An entrepreneur who was also critical of the Maoist era voiced similar concerns about the anti-corruption campaign:

Public servants have too much power to decide things. The Party discipline system punishes corrupt people, but people up top can protect their underlings because there isn’t an independent system of accountability or judicial system...The [anti-corruption] campaign can’t do anything about it. It’s just hurting the luxury industry which can no longer make money off corrupt officials; corrupt officials just hide their corruption better (Interview MN06).

What China needs, he argued, was an independent judiciary or a real opposition party (Interview MN06).

## **VI. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Directions**

Red memory in China is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon. We find that the formation of red memory for older respondents is rooted mainly in the quality of their lived experiences during the Maoist era, though they tend not to pass these memories to younger generations. Instead, young respondents, with rare exceptions, rely on official narratives of the Maoist era and Mao as a leader to form their opinion of the past. Importantly, red memory is conspicuously bifurcated: all respondents tend to compartmentalize their evaluations of the

Maoist era and of Mao as an individual leader, with far more respondents holding a positive opinion of Mao than of the Maoist era. This bifurcation of red memory mirrors the Party's 1981 resolution on Party history that sought to salvage the image of Mao while criticizing the worst excesses of the Maoist era.

We do not find Maoist nostalgia to be a pervasive phenomenon among our respondents, with only about one-third expressing nostalgia for the past. It should be noted, however, our interviews were done in the most developed area of China, and most of our respondents were very satisfied with their current life. Maoist nostalgia is a variant of Boym's (2001) "reflective nostalgia" in that it yearns for the loss of a purer spiritual life characterized by strong moral convictions, trust, and a sense of solidarity, which provides an analytical foil to the perceived moral depravity and emptiness of the materialist present.

Finally, Maoist nostalgia does seem to have implications that go beyond its reflective value: "nostalgic hardliners" are more likely to believe in the efficacy of Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign and support its intensification, while non-nostalgic "critical reformers" are less satisfied with the anti-corruption campaign and advocate systemic political reform.

There are several limitations to this study. First, we only sampled respondents from Shanghai and Hangzhou, cities that are located in one of the most ideologically liberal regions of China (Pan and Xu 2015). Despite this ideological bias, we do find it interesting that a non-negligible minority of respondents (about one third) expressed some degree of Maoist nostalgia and even higher proportions held favorable views of the Maoist era and Mao as a leader. Still, we expect to find higher concentrations of Maoist nostalgia in interior cities and the countryside. Second, the study's current sample size is too small to make reliable inferences about the Chinese population; the conclusions presented here are preliminary though still useful for

generating hypotheses for future work on Maoist nostalgia. Although we find little evidence to support the importance of basic demographic variables in forming red memory, we cannot substantiate these claims without a larger N.

To correct for this biases, we plan to conduct interviews in more cities in less developed and less liberal cities and to sample respondents from the countryside. We are also in the process of designing a survey to test the validity of the correlations presented in this paper; however, the significant political sensitivity of this topic may prevent us from conducting a survey.

## Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Outline (Chinese)

1. 背景部分
  - a. 请问您是哪儿人?
  - b. 您的祖籍是哪儿?
  - c. 请问您是在哪年出生的?
  - d. 您目前家里有几口人?
  - e. 您目前的职业是什么?
    - i. (对年纪教长的受访者) 您曾经还做过什么工作?
  - f. 您的最高学历是什么?
2. 接下来我想了解下您对目前一些社会现象的看法。
  - a. 首先, 您觉得我们国家目前的贫富差距严重吗?
  - b. 您觉得造成贫富差距最大的原因是什么?
  - c. 您觉得贫富差距问题应该怎样解决?
  - d. 您觉得改革开放前, 中国社会和现在相比是更平等还是更不平等?
  - e. 在您看来, 我国的经济的发展应该是由政府主导还是市场主导? 为什么?
    - i. (如果市场主导) 那么您觉得政府在经济发展过程中应该扮演怎样的角色?
  - f. 总的来说, 您对现在的生活满意吗?
3. 最近几年官员的腐败现象是一个热门话题。
  - a. 您觉得我国官员贪污腐败的根源是什么?
  - b. 您觉得贪污腐败现象是改革开放前严重还是改革开放后严重?
  - c. 您觉得改革开放后贪污腐败最严重的时期是那一段?
  - d. 您觉得目前政府一系列的反腐运动可以解决这个问题吗? 为什么?
    - i. 您觉得目前反腐的力度够大吗? 为什么?
4. 最后我想问问您对改革开放前毛泽东时代的印象或记忆
  - a. 请问(对年长者) 您对这个时代的总体印象是是怎样的?
  - b. (如果是外婆级的长者) 您改革开放前从事过哪些工作?
  - c. (对父母辈) 您父母当年是什么成分?
  - d. [根据被访人的年龄来问以下问题: ]
    - i.  $\geq 45$ 岁:
      1. 您对毛泽东时代印象最深刻的记忆是什么?
      2. 您对那个时代还有其他的回忆吗?
    - ii. 18-45岁:
      1. 请问您能不能谈谈您对毛泽东时代的印象?
      2. 您的父母亲有跟你讲过他们当时的一些故事吗? 讲过什么?
  - e. 最后我想问问, 总的来说, 您怎么评价毛泽东这个领导人?

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