

ON STATE CRIME AND POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

BY HE QINGLIAN

The falsification of the past deprives China of its potential for moving towards a more promising future.

Why have Chinese been deprived of a true recollection of history?

No enlightened country would allow its own people to be disgracefully ignorant of their own national history. The use of bogus “history” as a substitute for the truth and to avoid the burden of responsibility for historical crimes and wrongdoing is a crime against the people. A new understanding of the modern and contemporary history of China is, in essence, a search for the pathway to building the China of the future. It is unfortunate that the Chinese government is still unaware of this point and continues to explain history through lies, which it passes on to the next generation.

This year, around June 4th, the Chinese authorities continued to in the same old vein they have employed for the past 15 years—that is, making the June 4th participants who remain in China “disappear” during the “sensitive period,” and strictly forbidding the appearance on the Web or in other media of the term “June 4th” in any context. Moreover, cadres at the organization department level and above were required to view a so-called “Documentary History of the June 4th Incident,” a video full of carefully edited lies, through which the Chinese government hopes to extirpate true recollections of June 4th from Chinese people’s memories. Chinese who experienced the disaster are only able to memorialize its victims overseas. It is not only mainland Chinese who lose the right to remember the truth of history; even more tragically, Chinese overseas have their sight clouded by Chinese-Communist-controlled media of all sorts: “Don’t become tangled in history,” they are told, “Look to the future.” Some people will accept such specious views. In Hong Kong, once part of the free world, the account of the June 4th incident currently in middle school textbooks has been distorted beyond recognition.

However, the serious state crime of June 4th, along with all the crimes the Chinese Communist Party has committed since assuming the reins of political power, will never be expunged from history through deliberate attempts at cover-up and distortion on the part of the Chinese government. Ultimately, dis-

tortion by the Chinese government will be limited to those “history” books within Chinese borders. With avenues of communication expanding daily, the desire to eradicate those blood-stained recollections from people’s memories can only be realized through a literary inquisition and book burning in the style of Qin Shihuang or Hitler. If we are to clarify the historical facts surrounding June 4th and the many other state crimes under the Chinese Communists, Chinese people need to understand who should bear the principal responsibility for state crimes.

Chinese people have always had a vague understanding of who bears the principle responsibility for state crimes. This ambiguity is the product of two things. One is the Chinese Communist political “scapegoat” mechanism, which has attributed systematized violence to some individual political figure. The second is that in an atmosphere contaminated by a culture of dictatorship, the Chinese in the course of socialization have developed a thirst for sagely and benevolent leadership that has led to a succession of emperor-substitutes long after the passing of the imperial era.

For the reasons mentioned above, Chinese never reflect on (and we could say the current Chinese authorities do not allow them to reflect on) the relationship between the leader as an individual and the political system he or she depends on for existence. For that reason, in the minds of the great majority of Chinese, political crimes or errors are attributed to an individual political leader rather than to the political system under which they occur. As a result, China’s history since 1949 is replete with absurdities: individual leaders continuously perpetrate heinous crimes, yet criticism and reflection on the socialist system have been forbidden from the outset. For example, Deng Xiaoping was able to assess Mao’s career as 30 percent mistaken and 70 percent meritorious, but he still felt a need to include “maintaining Mao Zedong Thought” as one of his “Four Cardinal Principles.”¹

State crimes and scapegoats

Since the 1970s, the civilized nations of the world have had a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between crimes produced by political systems and individual political leaders. Communist China, on the other hand, has always cultivated a kind of political “scapegoat” mechanism. The need for

scapegoats is dictated by the political reality of the Chinese Communist Party, which since 1921 has been characterized by error and bloodshed. These blood-soaked errors are seriously at odds with the image the Party promotes of itself as consistently “glorious, great and correct” (*guangrong weida zhengque*), and have affected the legitimacy of Chinese Communist rule. Those who know the truth are compelled to ask: Is a party like this, which repeatedly makes errors for which thousands of people must pay with their lives, qualified to rule? And so every time a political struggle has come and gone, the newly-installed leaders, in order to bestow legitimacy on their own rule, habitually pass the blame for past errors onto those deposed from power.

Take for example the Communist Party’s well-known ten “Wrong Lines,” which have materialized each time a high-ranking Party official fell from power. The first included one of the Party founders, Chen Duxiu. Then in 1958, during the Great Leap Forward, Mao Zedong criticized and punished Peng Dehuai. During the Cultural Revolution, former president Liu Shaoqi served as Mao’s representative of “17 years of the wrong line” and as a “criminal, traitor and scab,” dying tragically in prison. After the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese Communist authorities, in order to shore up the legitimacy of their rule, allowed the so-called “Gang of Four” to take the blame, while the chief culprit of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong, continued to be regarded as the Great Leader. From 1983-86, in the campaign to eradicate spiritual pollution, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Hu Yaobang, was ferreted out to serve as “scapegoat,” after which he eventually died of depression. In the June 4th Incident of 1989, Zhao Ziyang, Hu’s successor as Party General Secretary, became “scapegoat” in his turn, and died while still under house arrest more than 15 years later. It would be fair to describe the “scapegoat” system as the flushing mechanism for the Communist Party’s sewage tank. Every time a crime is put on the head of a “scapegoat,” the Communist Party can continue on its way, consistently “glorious, great and correct.”

This chronic propaganda has caused the Chinese people to develop a thought pattern that regards all state crimes as merely the creations of individual political leaders, while the system of political dictatorship continues to be praised. Falun Gong’s anti-persecution campaign is an example; most Falun Gong members are clearly unaware of the fact that the persecution they suffer is a type of systematized political violence. They think it is simply an error on the part of a small number of top leaders such as Jiang Zemin. And now that Jiang Zemin has retired, they pin their hopes on Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, hoping they will negate Jiang’s “errors.”

Former prime minister Li Peng, widely regarded as the prime culprit of the June 4th incident, wrote a memoir that raised a key issue: whether it is Li Peng or the senior Party officials who refused him permission to publish his book, the focus is on “who takes the blame for June 4th.” In this regard, Li Peng and the senior Party officials all overlooked one thing: the June 4th incident was a state crime. Even when all of the top leaders of that time are dead and in their graves, those who inherit the reins of power through a legal and political rela-

tionship with the Chinese Communist Party should take responsibility for this serious state crime.

This principle of establishing responsibility holds for all historical crimes of the Chinese Communist Party and unjust acts of state. The principle is simple: Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, who fomented these state crimes, were all effective or actual heads of state, and they relied on the organizational and military resources they controlled in committing these unjust or criminal acts of state. Thus, those who should take responsibility for state crimes are not only the political leaders who perpetrated them personally, but also the heirs to their power, that is, the government constituted by their successors. These successors have an unshirkable obligation to bear the blame for the political crimes of the prior regimes from which they descend.

Political compensation and apology

In the case of large-scale state crimes, it is in fact very difficult for political successors to compensate victims through financial means. This does not imply, however, that there are no other means of compensation. With advances in political culture since the 1970s, apologies to victims by political leaders on behalf of the state, have become the means by which a number of nations have redressed historical injustice and achieved reconciliation. Among the national leaders who have apologized on behalf of their countries, probably the best known is the late Willy Brandt, who during a visit to Poland in 1970 while chancellor of West Germany knelt in grief before a memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Three years later, when Brandt was interviewed by the well-known Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, he explained to her that he had dropped to his knees not only for the Polish people, but first and foremost for the people of his own country, because “too many people need to dispel feelings of aloneness, must take up this heavy responsibility together . . . Admitting our responsibility not only helps cleanse our consciences, but helps us all to live together. Jews, Poles, Germans, we should all live together.”²

This brave action garnered Brandt the 1971 Nobel Peace Prize, and his act of political harmony in apologizing for his nation set a fine precedent: in 1993, Russian President Yeltsin formally apologized for the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia; in April 1993, August 1996 and September 1997, South African President de Klerk offered apologies for his country’s past policy of apartheid; in October 1997, the King of Norway apologized for Norwegian oppression of the Sami minority; in May 1997, English Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed regrets on behalf of the English government for the countless number of Irish people who starved to death during the potato famine.

The aforementioned apologies all involved historical acts of injustice by states—what Elazar Barkan terms “the guilt of nations.”³ In the reflections on and apologies for these unjust historical actions by states, Barkan sees trends toward a kind of new “international morality” and a “new globalization.” Because current and future social development requires reflection on and rectification of historical crimes, the political apologies given by perpetrators to their victims have become a

political commitment with real moral significance for furthering social harmony.

The Chinese government's approach

The examples given above of political leaders apologizing on behalf of their governments for unjust actions by the state have their origins primarily in two types of pressure. One is the rectification mechanism of democratic politics; the second is the need to restore the national image. Viewing the authoritarian Chinese government in this light, we see that a rectification mechanism does not exist, and that pressure to restore the national image is neither sustained nor strong enough to force the government to change its inherent methods of behavior.

Although China is a country that has seen repeated “state crimes” over the last half century—crimes for which over a billion Chinese have suffered their fill—the current authorities have never offered any sort of apology. In the government-controlled media throughout China and overseas, the exhortation to “look to the future” has become the rationale by which the Chinese government alters its history and forgets its past. In China, unjust actions by the state have occurred throughout history; more recent ones include the “Hu Feng counterrevolutionary clique incident,”⁴ the anti-Rightist movement, the Great Leap Forward, with its great famine of 1959–1961 in which an estimated 30 million people starved to death (referred to in official Chinese Communist history as the “three-year natural disaster”), unbroken decades of cruel class struggle; the Cultural Revolution, June 4th and the suppression of Falun Gong. The current government has either deliberately wiped these dark aspects of history from public memory or has completely distorted them. Furthermore, the Chinese authorities continue to commit new state crimes in an effort to conceal those of the past.

The Chinese government at one point adopted a superficial recognition of the errors of the Cultural Revolution, first in response to the domestic political situation and second due to the government's desire to improve its image as it moved toward joining the international community. Beginning in the 1990s, apart from the establishment of alliances among China's intellectual elite, domestic political pressure decreased, and opposition from the grassroots could not bring about change to the political posture of the authorities. It was only concerns over so-called international image that were effective. William Benoit has pointed out that those in authority recognize only five types of image repair strategies or methods: denial, evasion, to reduce offensiveness, to offer a corrective action and mortification (i.e., apology).⁵ Among these five methods of dealing with state crime, the Chinese government has never adopted the fourth (offering corrective action) or the fifth (mortification), but has used denial, evasion and reducing offensiveness, with the addition of one method not included among Benoit's five—standing the facts on their heads.

In the case of the anti-Rightist movement, for example, Deng Xiaoping, who had actively implemented Mao's policy toward intellectuals, adopted the strategies of evasion and



June 4th, 1989: out of sight, out of mind. Photo: AP Wide World Photos

reducing offensiveness. He retained the “Rightist” label for a number of individuals as proof that anti-Rightism had not been in error, and admitted only that attacks had occurred on too broad a scale. The blame for this excessiveness was placed on Mao, with Deng himself denying all responsibility. In the case of the 30 million people who died in the great famine, the authorities evaded blame by attributing the famine to the Soviet Union's insistence on repayment of debts (though in fact the Chinese government at that time devoted enormous financial resources to aiding Vietnam in its war against the United States) and to “natural disasters” (though in fact in those three years there were no large-scale natural disasters).

The handling of the June 4th Incident was a matter of standing the facts on their heads, reinterpreting the event until it became something completely different. In mainland China, not a single textbook mentions June 4th, and the seven Hong Kong textbooks that currently include content on June 4th avoid the most sensitive issue: that the central government ordered tanks and soldiers to fire on the people and the students. The textbooks say only that the military used armed force to clear Tiananmen Square, but do not specify the type of armed force used or indicate whether casualties resulted from clearing the Square. Most astonishing is how these texts portray the government as “wise and farsighted” in dealing with the June 4th incident:

In June, 1989, the June 4th incident broke out in mainland China, and China was for a time isolated internationally. China adopted a policy of sober observation and cool-headed response rather than a hostile attitude in the face of international isolation, and waited to improve international relationships when the time would be right. By 1996, relationships with most nations had returned to normal, and China once again took up an important international role.⁶

In this self-congratulatory wording we see no sign of shame regarding the massacre on the part of the Chinese government, nor any intention of turning over a new leaf. What we do see is the fundamental reason for the way the Chinese government has dealt with June 4th and other historical crimes, and that is that in recent years, the mainstream powers in the international community have reduced their criticism and concern over China's human rights situation for reasons of economic benefit. In a situation in which the voice of opposition at home has been forcibly eliminated and the voice of criticism internationally is weakening by the day, the Chinese government feels no need to apologize for past state crimes in order to improve its image.

Thirty years after Willy Brandt knelt in sorrow at the Polish memorial, Gerhard Schroeder, the second chancellor following German reunification, solemnly placed a wreath at the same memorial, then dedicated Willy Brandt Square nearby. Schroeder gave the most fitting explanation of Brandt's kneeling in sorrow: through this special gesture, Brandt made clear that only by accepting responsibility for history is it possible to move toward the future.⁷

I recall a famous saying of the Roman statesman Cicero that if a man does not understand the circumstances of his birth, it is as if he never grows up. Among the nations of the world, China has the longest recorded history, and the most ancient tradition of wielding the brush and making books. Wen Tianxiang wrote, "In Qi there was Tai Shi's bamboo tablet; in Jin there was Dong Hu's brush,"⁸ praising two official historians who wrote without fear of the forces of power. But today Chinese have been deprived of their historical memory. Young people do not know the truth about June 4th, which happened a mere 15 years ago, and they know even less about the Cultural Revolution and other countless incidents that have occurred during 50-year tenure of the Chinese Communist Party. In some sense, to be ignorant of the history of one's own nation is tantamount to never having achieved social maturity. Even more importantly, the millions of Chinese who died tragically in these repeated state crimes should not be treated as mere statistics; these were lives filled with happiness, anger, grief and joy, and the fact of their being deprived of life should not for any reason be buried in the dust of history. Otherwise China will see countless more crimes committed by state power in the future.

It is this writer's belief that no matter how the Communist

Party's political power evolves from now on, the Chinese government should apologize for the historical crimes that have taken place under Chinese Communist rule. The reason is simple: only by the current authorities taking responsibility for history will it be possible for China to move toward the vision of a beautiful future. But the demand that the present government take responsibility for history comes with a condition; in order for the truth of history to be restored, false history must be deconstructed.

Translated by a friend of HRIC

This is translated from the forward to He Qinglian (ed.), *Decoding the Secrets of Chinese History in the Second Half of the 20th Century* (Ershi shiji houbanye lishi jiemi) (Sunnyvale, CA: Broad Press Inc., 2005). The full article in Chinese can be accessed online at <http://ncn.org/asp/zwginfo/da-KAY.asp?ID=62526%20&ad=2/18/2005>.

NOTES

1. The Four Cardinal Principles of Deng Xiaoping Thought are: keeping to the socialist road and upholding the dictatorship of the proletariat (the people's democratic dictatorship), leadership by the Communist Party, Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought.
2. This quote is back-translated from the Chinese.
3. In his book *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2000), Barkan, the chairman of the cultural studies department of Claremont Graduate University, catalogs past and present claims for restitution by various groups and explores the theoretical practicality and morality of these claims.
4. Hu Feng, a famous leftist theoretician on literature and art, opposed Mao's policy of literature and art serving only political ends. Mao launched a national campaign against Hu Feng and his followers in 1955, during which Hu and more than of his followers were imprisoned or put in labor camps. Hu was finally released in 1979.
5. Benoit, a professor in University of Missouri-Columbia's Department of Communication, outlines these methods in "Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication," *Public Relations Review* 23 (Summer 1997): 177-186.
6. The source of this quote is not clear, but it is likewise quoted by Cheung Man-kwong, a member of Hong Kong's Legislative Council, in a newspaper article: "Liusi de jiaoshi he langhua," *Ming Pao*, May 14, 2004. See <http://www.cheungmankwong.org.hk/newspaper/np20040514.html>.
7. Schroeder said, "This image of Willy Brandt kneeling has become a symbol. A symbol of accepting the past and of understanding it as an obligation for reconciliation. As an obligation for a common future." See <http://www.facinghistorycampus.org/campus/memorials.nsf/0/DC396F572BD4D99F85256FA80055E9B1?OpenDocument>.
8. Tai Shi, the grand historian of the Qi state, wrote of the evil acts of his king, even after others were killed for doing so. Dong Hu, a historian of the Jin state, was similarly critical of the powers of his time. Wen Tianxiang (Wen T'ien-hsiang) was the last resisting prime minister of the Southern Song Dynasty. He was captured by Kublai Khan and spent three years under house arrest before being executed on his own request. Wen wrote his famous poem "Ode to the Noble Spirit" (*Zhangqiqe*) during his captivity.