

TROUBLE WITH THE PAST

Nathan Woolley

IN LATE SEPTEMBER 1941, Japanese forces in Hebei surrounded a detachment of the Eighth Route Army and thousands of local inhabitants on Langya Mountain 狼牙山. One company was tasked with drawing enemy attention to allow the main force to slip away along with the civilians. They left a single squad to defend the peak. In the end, five men gallantly held their position to the last bullet, and when the bullets ran out, they threw stones. When they were sure the others had gotten away safely, they chose to leap off the mountain rather than surrender. Three perished, but two survived and made good their escape.

Official histories, children's textbooks, and artworks celebrate the

story of the 'Five Heroes of Langya Mountain', which was also made into a film in 1958. The shooting of a new 3D feature began in 2015 to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the iconic battle. In 2016, it was also the subject of a court ruling protecting the reputation of the soldiers involved.



Still from the film, *Five Heroes of Langya Mountain*
Source: Xinhuanet

The issue goes back to August 2013. The Guangzhou Public Security Bureau 广州市公安局 detained Zhang Guanghong 张广红, a resident of Guangzhou, for posting remarks on Sina **Weibo** that questioned the accuracy of the official account. He suggested that the soldiers involved had bullied local inhabitants. Following reports of the case in state media, Hong Zhenkuai 洪振快, then executive editor with the scholarly journal *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (see Chapter 4, ‘The Language of Discipline’, pp.108–129), published articles raising further doubts about what actually happened on Langya Mountain, both on the website of Caijing in September and in *Yanhuang Chunqiu* in November. Drawing on contemporary reports, later accounts, and personal diaries, Hong questioned the location,



Hong Zhenkuai: questioned official accounts
Source: Baiké

the nature of the action, the means of escape, the number of casualties, and whether the soldiers stole local radishes.

In November 2013, Mei Xinyu 梅新育, an economist at the Institute of International Trade and Economic Co-operation of the Ministry of Commerce 商务部, used his Weibo account to call Hong and his editor at *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, Huang Zhong 黄钟, ‘sons of bitches’ 狗娘养的. Reposting Mei’s comments, Guo Songmin 郭松民, former air force pilot and now leftist commentator, repeated the epithet in his diatribe against ‘historical nihilists’ on Weibo. In March 2014, Hong and Huang sued them both for defamation. Zhang Guanghong’s appeal against his detention was rejected in May 2015. Hong and Huang lost their cases against Mei and Guo in December 2015 as well as their subsequent appeals.

In another case, Ge Changsheng 葛长生 and Song Fubao 宋福宝, sons of the two soldiers who escaped, sued Hong in August 2015 for defaming their fathers. Hong lost this case too in June 2016; he has stated he will continue to appeal.

In October 2016, the Supreme People’s Court issued a statement

calling these rulings ‘model cases’ (by Hong and Huang against Mei and Guo, and by Ge and Song against Hong). The court argued that by defaming the five soldiers who opposed foreign aggression, Hong had harmed not only the reputation and honour of heroic figures, but also the public interest. In rejecting Hong’s arguments, it stated that the interests of the CCP cannot be divided from the interests of the Chinese state or the Chinese people. It also questioned his use of sources.

Hong Zhenkuai and Huang Zhong lost their positions as editors at *Yanhuang Chunqiu*. The new editors invited both Mei Xinyu and Guo Songmin to a meeting addressing the future of the journal.

The arguments might seem pedantic in nature, but in the eyes of the Party-state, they amount to nothing less than questioning the historical justification for the Party’s right to rule. The actions of Communist forces in the War of Resistance Against Japan (also known as the Second Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1945), and the stories told about them, are a block in the foundations of the historical legitimacy of Communist Party rule. As such, the Party does not see them as a suitable topic for debate.



Ge Changsheng and Song Fubao at a ceremony in Beijing for ‘protecting the reputation of the heroes of Langya Mountain’
Source: wyzxwk.com

Investigation of recent history may be sensitive, but these are still exciting times for historians of China. Chinese research institutions now have access to an unprecedented range of resources, including online materials. This has led to rapid growth in the field of historical enquiry, widening the scope of research and demanding greater rigour in the application of historical method and the integration of foreign scholarship, notably from Japan and the West. But new opportunities bring new challenges.

The discovery in modern times of bamboo manuscripts dating from the centuries before the Common Era have revolutionised understanding of this formative period of Chinese history. Celebrated finds from the 1970s to the 1990s unearthed from tombs in documented digs, have challenged many assumptions about the nature of early Chinese history. Unfortunately, in recent years, collections of bamboo slips have appeared on the antiques market without provenance, presumably looted. Such undocumented collections have now been acquired by a number of significant museums

and universities in China, prompting unease in the academic community. By acquiring them, are institutions supporting theft and damage? Are academics engaged in their study in any way culpable? And are all these collections, purchased at significant sums, even authentic and not just forgeries? A spirited exchange of views on these matters occurs in private conversations, but published concerns remain few due to the reputational damage that may ensue.

Scholars working on other periods are also adjusting to the appearance of new sources. For medieval times, tomb inscriptions unearthed in large numbers, often unwittingly in

the process of urban and rural development, provide a wealth of information on individual lives in the remote past. Ongoing efforts to marshal and analyse their content are likely to last for years.

Historians of the Qing and the Republican period, meanwhile, are turning their attention to hitherto unexamined materials preserved in official archives and elsewhere. Some require sensitivity to the rights of people alive today: families don't always appreciate the examination of diaries or documents involving deceased relatives, while religious communities might not benefit from published studies of texts describing their antecedents.



| Inscribed bamboo slips of *The Art of War*, unearthed on Yinque Mountain, Linyi, Shandong in 1972
Source: Wikimedia Commons

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