In his paper on official histories published on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) William Kirby expressed his surprise at the (curious) absence of a master narrative on 20th-century Chinese history. He reported that there was an enormous number of publications focusing on a myriad of different aspects of “national history,” full of historical details and sources, but he was unable to detect a coherent master narrative undergirding this plethora of detail. Left unexplored was the larger question of why PRC historiography was unable to present such a narrative on such an important commemorative occasion. This is particularly surprising, as through such exercises as the Yan’an (延安) Rectification Campaign and the “Resolution on some historical questions”2 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) defined a frame for the interpretation of post-Opium War history that has served as the unchallengeable basis for official history writing in the PRC. Textbooks for middle-school and university students are still written according to this resolution, and history examinations are based on what the resolution has to say about the period between 1840 and 1945.

The period since 1945 was brought into the realm of official history with the “Resolution on some questions regarding the history of the Party since the

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2 “Guanyu ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi” (“Some questions concerning history”), in Mao Zedong, Xuanji (Selected Works), Vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1953), pp. 975–995.
founding of the PRC” of 1981. However, it has so far not been able to claim as much authority as the 1945 Resolution. Indeed, instead of dominating the interpretation of 20th-century Chinese history, the CCP has increasingly been unable to hinder alternative interpretations from entering the discussion. This article analyses the process of writing and re-writing history in the PRC trying to give an answer to why the CCP has lost its ability to define a master narrative for post-1949 Chinese history and why other forces have so far not been strong enough to replace the CCP historiography with an alternative dominant interpretation.

**History and Identity**

The whole question of whether a master narrative is necessary or desirable is much contested. For post-modern philosophers, the very core of post-modern thought consists of “modernist total ‘grand narratives’ being continually repudiated by different forms of postmodern scepticism.” However, recent discussions stress the multiplicity of grant-narratives and the necessity to accept divergent ways of writing history in the context of different cultures. The French philosopher Lyotard as one of the major proponents of this idea stresses:

> It seems to me that there is now a sort of comprehension of the so-called multiple ways of understanding the meaning of communities in Africa, South America, North America, India, Russia, or Asia, and so to be vigilant against grand narratives is precisely to be prudent and aware of the capacity for human communities to have different ways of narrating their stories. It’s not destroying these narratives, and it’s not necessarily protecting them; it’s just respecting them.

Instead of repudiating the idea of a grand or master narrative, Lyotard seems to stress that the “meaning of communities” is established through narratives

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3 “Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de juweyi” (“On some questions concerning the history of the Party since the founding of the PRC”), *Renmin ribao (People’s Daily)*, 1 July 1981, pp. 1–7.