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The Preservation of Memory: Combating the CCP's Historical Revisionism and Erasure of Culture

Congressional-Executive Commission on China

Chairman Chris Smith

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Today's hearing on The Preservation of Memory: Combating the CCP's Historical Revisionism and Erasure of Culture, serves as a capstone, or a coda, on the work of this Commission during this 118th Congress.

I want to begin by posing a handful of questions:

- Why is it that much of our Commission staff time is dedicated to producing a statutorily-mandated annual report that tracks the human rights abuses committed by the Chinese Communist Party?

- Why do we report upon efforts to sinicize religious beliefs and erase the identities of distinct ethnicities, such as Uyghurs, Tibetans and Mongolians?
- Why do we record the names of individuals who have disappeared into that penal archipelago, the *laogai*, or are detained in concentration camps in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, in our Political Prisoner Database?

It is I believe because we are engaged in a grand project that seeks to preserve memory – the memory of the Chinese people writ large, undistorted by the propaganda narratives of the CCP, the memory of ethnic groups whose unique cultural, linguistic and religious identities are under threat of erasure, and, above all, the memory of individuals, who the party would blot into oblivion.

This last point is very important. Because behind all the statistics we collect and catalogue lie individuals, each born to a mother and a father, each a precious human life bearing an inherent, God-given dignity.

And above all, our CECC preservation project gives testament to the notion that Truth does exist, that it is objective and not subjective, and that while it cannot be extinguished, we still must do our part to preserve it.

Today there are Custodians of Memory within China, or who were forced to leave China, who seek to preserve Truth, and who often suffered for that.

Independent historians, who researched and recorded what the Communist Party considered taboo subjects, such as Yang Jisheng, who wrote Tombstone, the definitive catalogue of the Great Famine of 1958 to 1962.

Yang was a senior editor at Xinhua News Agency, though instead of being content with writing canned news reports to advance the Party's propaganda narratives, used his spare time to access archives and to conduct [independent research](#) with regards to a famine caused by misguided Mao Tse-tung's policies, killing an estimated 36 million people.

Yang's great work remains banned in China, while he himself has been [banned from leaving](#) China to receive the accolades which he deserves.

Or our witness today, Rowena He, who [Quote] "taught the taboo." Because she wrote and lectured on subjects such as the Tiananmen Massacre, she was driven out of her job at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, presumably at the behest of Beijing.

Now the people that Yang Jisheng and Rowena He write about, who perished in the Great Famine or were mowed down at Tiananmen, are blood martyrs, what one may call "red martyrs."

But there is another kind of martyr, what traditionally is called a "white martyr." They are those who are stripped of position and prestige, who suffer because they are unbowed in their commitment to the truth, regardless of the consequences, people such as Yang and Rowena.

Such is the lot of the independent historian, who shuns ideological narratives and lies.

A few weeks ago, Pope Francis came out with a [letter](#) which, while focused on the study of Church history, also has insights into the study of history more generally. While I am not prone to quote Pope Francis – I prefer Benedict or the sainted John Paul – his statement on the present state of historical inquiry has relevance to why we are here today.

For the Pope noted that there is an:

“[U]rgent need for a greater sense of history at a moment when we see a tendency to dismiss the memory of the past or to invent one suited to the requirements of dominant ideologies. Faced with the cancellation of past history or with clearly biased historical narratives, the work of historians, together with knowledge and dissemination of their work, can act as a curb on misrepresentations, partisan efforts at revisionism, and their use to justify wars, persecutions, the ... utilization of weapons and any number of other evils.”

I think that this is a fitting reminder of the proper role of the historian, to give testimony to truth and memory, while rejecting the ersatz manipulation of ideology that masquerades as “history.”

With that, I want to turn to my colleague, co-chair Jeff Merkley, with whom it has been a pleasure to serve together with this 118th Congress.