

# The Legacy of the Second Sino-Japanese War in the People's Republic of China: Mapping the Official Discourses of Memory

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**Abstract:** *The Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) occupies an integral position in the memory politics of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In recent years, dominant representations of the war create a memory discourse which portrays the heroic triumph of the Chinese people led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over Japan. This article shows how the war has been remembered from the victory of the Communist revolution in 1949 to the present in the PRC. It contributes to the debate on the effectiveness and limitations of the monopoly of war memory by the CCP.*

**Keywords:** *war, narrative, memory, control, state, institution, myth, the Chinese Communist Party*

## Introduction

On 27 February 2014, China's national legislature, the Standing Committee of the National Congress reached a landmark decision in the history of Chinese memory politics. It designated 13 December as the National Memorial Day for the Nanjing Massacre Victims. Since 2014, memorial ceremonies have been held annually on 13 December in the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, in which top members of the CCP leadership participate. On

the same day, themes of war appear in national and regional newspapers, urging readers to carry on war memory by never forgetting the pain and suffering that Chinese went through in the war years. Throughout the same month, audiences can find similar themes in documentaries, television dramas, and films. The commemoration of the war through national ceremonial practices and media representations indicates that the PRC is committed to shaping a sense of victimhood in Chinese identity. At the same time, it also shows that the memory of the war is deeply embedded in the social discourse of the PRC.

This article analyzes the development of official discourse of the memory of the Second Sino-Japanese War from 1949 to the present in the PRC. The official memory discourse is defined as ways in which certain images, people and events associated with the war are remembered by performing official rituals or through official representations. In the PRC, as in most countries, the construction of official state discourse of war memory is a practice of political engineering, in which narratives are selected, institutionalized, legitimized, and delegitimized by state agents and individuals. In this process, state agents aim at establishing and maintaining the monopoly over the narratives of war, but also actively prevent the development of counter narratives. Individuals construct alternative ways of remembering the war that tend to question the accepted narratives, but they have not been successful in establishing counter memories of the war that

deviate from the dominant narratives. The official state discourse ends up as closely controlled narratives that consist of heroic resistance and nationalist victimization. Alternative memory of the war largely falls into the scope of the controlled narratives. By surveying the evolution and structure of state war memory, this article contributes to our understanding of the dominant role of the state in shaping the official discourse of war memory in the PRC.

The article is structured into four main sections: state control, narrative, themes of war memory, and private memories of the war in the PRC. The article first introduces memory theory and presents a survey of existing scholarship as the basis of analysis, and it presents the ways in which the Chinese state extends its control over public commemoration and memorialization of the war. Then, the article outlines the structure of war memory, analyzing three types of narratives: the narrative of resistance, the victor narrative, and the victim narrative. The article continues to illustrate how the Communists, the Nationalists and Japan have been remembered in the public and the private spheres. The remainder of the article turns its attention to the memoirs and oral histories of Chinese veterans, and it discusses how these mechanisms function as a variation of the official memory of the war.

## Theory and Literature

Memory studies has recently become a burgeoning field in the West and scholarly attention to the memory of the Second Sino-Japanese War is gathering momentum. In the field of memory, the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s developed the concept of “collective memory” which he defined as a shared perception of the past formed through the communication and interaction among members of social and cultural groups

(Halbwachs 1992). The German Egyptologist Jan Assmann and the cultural studies scholar Aleida Assmann have introduced the term “cultural memory” into the debate. According to the Assmanns, cultural memory is determined by social conditions, political institutions, and power structures (Aleida Assmann 2011; Jan Assmann 2011). In this context, the study of the memory of the Second Sino-Japanese War in the PRC has attracted some academic attention. Chan Yang assesses how the war memory evolved over time in the PRC, drawing particular attention to the roles of state and non-state actors in developing the discourse of war memory in the period between 1949 and 1982 (2018). Rana Mitter and Zheng Wang, among others, have explored the links among war memory, nationalism, and politics in the PRC (Mitter 2020; Wang 2012). Other studies focus on specific aspects of war memory in the PRC. Aaron William Moore’s study, though not exclusively focused on the PRC’s war memory, examines letters, postcards and memoirs written by Chinese servicemen in the war from 1937 to 1945 (Moore 2013). Kirk Denton analyzes the narratives of war and their political and ideological implications in the PRC’s state museums (Denton 2014). While these studies illustrate the extensive literature on the Chinese memory of the war, there remains, so far, no study that specifically examines the structure of the official state discourse of war memory in the PRC from 1949 to the present.

This article utilizes the theories of memory reconstruction by Halbwachs and the Assmanns to approach war memory in the PRC. It shows how central themes of the PRC’s war memory are sustained by the media and institutions, among which are artifacts like textbooks, memorial museums, and oral histories. This article contributes to the discussion of the PRC’s official state discourse of memory relating to the Second Sino-Japanese War. Since the Communist takeover of China in 1949, the discourses of war memory

have been constantly subject to a high level of political manipulation, and war memory has been used as a political tool for the CCP to consolidate its legitimacy. This article also contributes to illustrating the periodization of war memory in the PRC. It suggests that the Chinese official discourse of war memory is divided into the Mao era (1949-1976) and the post-Mao era (1976 to present). In the Mao era, the CCP established a discourse of war memory that emphasized the victory of the Communist revolution and the anti-Japanese resistance led by the Communists. In the post-Mao era, the newly-emerging victim narrative that emphasized Japanese atrocities developed in parallel with the victor narrative of the Mao era in the discourse of war memory. The victim narrative tended to overshadow the victor narrative for thirty years from the 1980s to the 2000s. Since Xi Jinping took power in 2012, the victor narrative has made a strong comeback in the official discourse of war memory in the PRC.

### State Monopoly of War Memory

The Second Sino-Japanese War is a major catastrophe and national struggle in Chinese history. The tragic and heroic nature of the war explains why it has been important for the PRC to commemorate and memorialize the war. On the one hand, the war is one of the most destructive episodes in modern Chinese history. It is estimated that during the war, approximately 100 million people were forced to become refugees and at least 20 million civilians were killed (Larry and MacKinnon 2001, 6). The human rights abuses during the war were so catastrophic that even after seventy years the scars have not yet been healed in contemporary Chinese society. On the other hand, the war was the most heroic moment in Chinese history. It reminds us of the victory of the Chinese people to liberate themselves from the exploitation of foreign

imperialist powers. The CCP claims to have played a leading role in the war. Therefore, how the war is publicly remembered becomes relevant to the construction of Chinese nationalism and to the consolidation of the CCP's legitimacy.

The PRC government uses a nationalist rhetoric to define the nature of the war. The official discourse refers to the war as the "Chinese People's Anti-Japanese War of Resistance," rather than using a more neutral term such as the Second Sino-Japanese War. As indicated by the term "resistance," China's involvement in the war is framed in a nationalist fashion, emphasizing the defense and sacrifice of Chinese people for national liberation. The term "resistance" also serves to downplay Chinese collaboration with Japan, which widely existed as part of everyday life in many areas of wartime China.<sup>1</sup>

The PRC government has been seeking ways to create official memories of the war that serves to stabilize Communist rule. In this process, political considerations predominate in the efforts of constructing war memory. The processes of constructing war memory in the PRC impose exclusiveness. The official memory of the war should never be challenged, amended, or overturned. While the opportunities to generate memories of the war abound, the government spares no effort to suppress memories that deviate from the official memories, because this raises questions that are difficult for the government to answer. To be sure, the state is unable to completely deter alternative memories that exist in the private sphere. Alternative memories will inevitably coexist and compete with official memories. However, alternative memories are closely monitored by the government, and it is unlikely that they will prevail in the public domain and become an established way of remembering.

The state monopoly on the official discourse of

war memory prescribes rules for what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten. The commemoration and remembering of the war are repeatedly articulated through mass media, which facilitate public identification of China as the victor/victim and of Japan as the perpetrator. Stories of Japanese wartime atrocities such as the Nanjing Massacre and Unit 731 are retold in television dramas, films, and documentaries, reminding the Chinese public to never forget national grievances, deprivation, and humiliation at the hands of Japanese aggressors, as well as the hard-earned national liberation. Meanwhile, the state's significant attention to remembering this war overshadows the collective remembering of other wars that China fought in the twentieth century, from the Sino-Soviet War (1929) and the Civil War (1945-1949) in the Republican era to the Korean War (1950-1953) and the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979) in the Communist era. The Sino-Soviet War and Sino-Vietnamese War, especially, have been almost forgotten in the social discourse of the PRC. While these military conflicts are certainly significant events that have received public attention, their legacies have not been remembered in the same way as the Second Sino-Japanese War.

The PRC facilitates memories of the war that clearly distinguishes between "self" and "other." The Communists are always the "self." The "other" could be the Nationalists as an internal foe or the Japanese as an external adversary. For much of the postwar period, both the Nationalists and the Japanese have been blamed for causing sufferings to the Chinese during the war. In the Mao era, the Nationalists were stigmatized as counterrevolutionaries who had oppressed the Chinese people. It is only since the 1980s that the PRC has begun to rehabilitate the Nationalist "other" and publicly acknowledge their contribution in the war. The reason for this change was that after the death of Mao, the PRC policy towards Taiwan shifted from

confrontation to engagement, which was designed to woo the Nationalists in Taiwan to negotiate a reunification treaty. However, this gesture of rehabilitation avoided acknowledging the Nationalists' critical role in the war. The Nationalists were still regarded as an internal "other," rather than part of the "self." For their part, the Japanese have been demonized as "devils" who committed appalling crimes against the Chinese. This model of dichotomy between self and other in the PRC's war memory demonstrates the state manipulation of war memory, which honors the Communists, dismisses the Nationalists, and condemns the Japanese.

While the war occupies a significant position in the PRC's national memory today, memories of the war have evolved from partial oblivion to full revival. In the first thirty years of Communist rule, the war was publicly remembered as a revolutionary victory of proletarian over imperialist exploitation. The "liberation" narrative dominated the official discourse of war memory, highlighting heroism and avoiding expressions of suffering. Representations of the war were limited to heroic triumph in the public sphere. After the death of Mao, the CCP abandoned Mao's political line of class struggle, and loosened its control over narratives of the war memory. Accordingly, war memory entered the public sphere under the auspices of the state, and a discourse of suffering and humiliation evolved in this process.

The trends in the development of war memory in the PRC are most evident in the state initiative of building war and military museums across the country. In the Mao era, the state made only limited efforts to preserve war memory, and a very small number of museums were erected to commemorate the war. In the 1950s, the Chinese government established a military museum in Beijing to exhibit the victory of Chinese revolution under the leadership of the CCP. The narratives of



museum exhibitions portrayed the war as a heroic triumph in the course of China's revolutionary history. Due to the domestic political chaos, the museum remained closed for much of the 1960s and 1970s (Denton 2014, 121-132). The Chinese government set up another museum dedicated to Japanese war crimes in Fushun in 1986. This museum served to preserve the memory of Japanese atrocities and to implement the political "re-education" of Japanese prisoners of war after 1945 (Mitter 2020, 112).

In the post-Mao era, public museums dedicated to the Second Sino-Japanese War mushroomed across the country. The Museum of War of Resistance against Japan was erected in the Beijing suburb of Wanping where the war had broken out in 1937, in July 1987, which soon became the national center for remembering and commemorating the Second Sino-Japanese War. The Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall was completed on 15 August 1985, the 40th anniversary of the end of the war. The Nanjing Museum of the Site of Lijixiang Comfort Station opened as its branch in December 2015, housing the archival evidence of Chinese "sex slaves" (aka "comfort women") who were forced to serve the Japanese military in Nanjing under the Japanese occupation. Other museums that the state has constructed to memorialize the war include the Museum of the Criminal Evidence of Japanese Imperial Army Unit 731 built outside of Harbin in 1985, and the September 18 Historical Museum built in Shenyang in 1991 to commemorate the 1931 "Mukden Incident."



**Figure 1: The Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression.**

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After Xi Jinping took office in 2012, the CCP strengthened its control of the official war memory discourse. This is evident in the CCP's initiative to redefine the nature of the war in textbooks. In January 2017, The Ministry of Education announced that the Second Sino-Japanese War would officially be dated as lasting for fourteen years instead of eight years, starting with Japan's invasion of Manchuria on 18 September 1931 in what is known as the Mukden Incident (Zhao 2017, 12). The war had long been defined as an eight-year struggle lasting from 1937 to 1945, in which the start date is the Marco Polo Bridge Incident on 7 July 1937. The 2017 government edict declared that official interpretations of the war from now on would have to use the "fourteen-year" definition. Textbooks referring to the war would have to go through a comprehensive amendment. It is remarkable that not just history textbooks but also textbooks of other subjects such as Chinese and ethics would have to update the wording wherever the war is mentioned (*Huanqiu*, 2017).

### Narrative: Resistance, Victor, and Victim

The PRC's war memory discourse consists of narratives of resistance, victor, and victim. The resistance narrative emphasizes national unity and solidarity in fighting for national liberation. Its focus is on the memorialization of heroes and battles. The government has designated many personalities as heroes for their contribution in the war. The officially designated heroes include not only civilians and Communist and Nationalist servicemen, but also foreign military officers, doctors and journalists who assisted China in fighting the Japanese. The battles fought by the Communists and Nationalists in the war are another theme in the war memory. In recent years, Chinese newspapers have reported numerous stories of battles during the war. For example, in 2014 the *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*), the mouthpiece of the CCP, reprinted documents relating to thirty battles that the Communists and the Nationalists fought during the war. The documents were temporarily published online by the National Archives Bureau in 2014. They are selected from many written records about the war in numerous historical archives across the country. These documents detail the course of the battles, the number of casualties and the intensity of resistance.

The resistance narrative is further consolidated by the CCP's directive to redefine the length of the war in textbooks already touched upon. It has constructed a way of remembering the war that gives prominence to the resistance in China's struggle against Japan. According to the *People's Daily*, this decision aims to establish a way of remembering that the war is a long-term nationalist struggle led by the CCP. The revisionism is justified on the grounds of characterizing the war as an "uninterrupted" historical process and a "continuous" struggle. In this view, the "total" war of resistance at the

national level (1937-1945) evolved from the "partial" war of resistance at the regional level (1931-1937). During this period, the CCP made unremitting efforts to mobilize national unity to resist Japanese aggression. The "partial" war of resistance is both the basis and preparation for the subsequent national struggle. These two periods are inseparable, forming an uninterrupted "historical chain" (Zhang 2017,11).

It must be pointed out, however, that Chinese resistance as such during 1931 to 1936 is a myth, and its significance should not be overestimated. From 1931 to 1936, the resistance activity was concentrated in Manchuria where Japan established a client state known as Manchukuo as early as 1932. The overall resistance during this period was relatively weak and sporadic. The highest estimate for membership in the resistance is around 300,000, accounting for approximately one percent of the 30 million population of Manchuria in the early 1930s (Mitter 2000, 200). When Manchukuo was established, the Japanese Kwantung Army launched a series of large military operations to eliminate resistance activity, and as a result, by 1933 the resistance had been largely suppressed. The anti-Japanese resistance cannot be simply understood through nationalism either. This has to do with the complex structure of resistance membership. The resistance members included Chinese and Korean Communists, soldiers of the reorganized army of the local warlord Zhang Xueliang, and former "bandits" who indulged in extortion and raids. The number of "bandits" is notably large, accounting for almost half of the total number of resistance fighters in Manchuria. Most resistance members were not motivated by nationalism. While it is true that the Communists took a nationalist stance in their resistance against Japan, it is debatable whether other resistance forces which had no particular political allegiance were motivated by nationalism and dedicated themselves to a

nationalist cause (Mitter 2000, 190-203).

The victor narrative depicts the war as a Communist victory against Japanese imperialism. In the Mao era, the Communist leaders did not use the narrative of national humiliation; rather, they used a Marxist theory of class struggle to explain the national proletarian struggle against foreign imperialist foes. The victory of the Communist revolution was glorified as the great liberation of Chinese people from the oppression of Japanese imperialism and the counterrevolutionary Nationalist government, and Mao therefore became the great savior of the Chinese nation (Wang 2015, 229). The theory of class struggle enabled the development of a narrative in the PRC's war memory that defined China as a victor and the war as a struggle that transcended the boundaries of race, nation, and state (Gao 2015, 81). The narrative of "China as a victor" continued into the post-Mao era. On 7 July 1987, the 50th Anniversary of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, Yang Shangkun, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee, reiterated the position that China was a victor in the war: the war is a "great turning point in the historical development of the Chinese nation from decline to rejuvenation," China "for the first time achieved a complete victory against imperialist aggression," and the Chinese "as a semi-colonial weak nation created a miracle of defeating an imperialist power" (*Ren min ri bao* 1987, 1). After Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, this victory narrative was re-articulated as an integral part of the "Chinese Dream," a discourse actively promoted by the CCP to reconstruct Chinese nationalism. To fulfill the "Chinese Dream," China must take three steps of "standing up," "growing rich," and "becoming strong." As the first step in the direction towards Chinese rejuvenation, the victory of the war takes on a symbolic significance.

Yet the death of Mao in 1976 not only marked

the formal end of the Cultural Revolution, but also the beginning of the transition from class-based revolutionary ideology to nation-centered patriotism in China. One locus of this new patriotism has been an emphasis on China's wartime victimization at the hands of the invading Japanese Imperial Army. This victim-centric view of history is not limited just to China but is also part of broader post-colonial and post-Cold War trends globally. In post-Mao China, narratives of victimization and national humiliation by the Japanese are often found in history textbooks and media coverage. And in textbooks approved after 1992, the "victim narrative" was expanded even further to blame Japan (and the West) for China's traumatic and humiliating experiences in the past hundred years lasting from the First Opium War (1839-1842) to the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War. In newspapers, too, reports about Chinese victimization far exceeded those on China's victory in the war which prevailed in previous decades. The data of reports in newspapers from 2005 to 2015 shows that the number of reports about Chinese victimization such as the Nanjing Massacre was almost six times as many as reports about battles in the war (Wang 2016, 32-33). The victim narrative focuses on quantifying Chinese suffering in detail. Coverage of Japanese atrocities in the war tends to concentrate on the process of determining the number of victims, resembling what Coble has called "a numbers game," in which the goal seems to maximize the number of victims (Coble 2007, 404). In the immediate aftermath of the war, the Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek announced that the war had killed 1.75 million Chinese. The official number of estimated casualties increased dramatically under Communist rule. In the Mao era, the CCP declared that 9.32 million Chinese were killed in the war. That number remained unchanged for many years. Then, in 1995, Jiang Zemin, the general secretary of the CCP, raised the death toll to a rough estimate of 35 million, and this has been the official Chinese figure ever since (Gries

2004, 80). It should be noted that identifying the number of victims by the Chinese government reflects continuities between the pre- and post-1949 periods. The official number of 300,000 Nanjing Massacre victims claimed by the Communists, for instance, was not their own invention, but rather emerged from the war crimes trials conducted by the Nationalists in the late 1940s.

### **Thematic Focus: Communists, Nationalists and Japan in the War**

The Communists, Nationalists and Japan are the main actors in the war, and each has been remembered in specific ways in the PRC. The Communists have been remembered as the national savior. This way of remembering the Communists is particularly evident in the “bulwark” (*zhongliu dizhu*) discourse that was first proposed by Mao in 1945 and is today actively promoted by the CCP. The CCP has so far produced numerous reports, books, and documentaries to construct a myth that the Communists served as the backbone force in the war. The “bulwark” narrative distinguishes between a front dominated by the Nationalists and a rear in which the Communists were dominant. It claims that these two battlefields are interrelated and interdependent. The rear outweighs the front in terms of the long-term outcome and significance of the war. The essential role of the Communists in the war is justified on the grounds of the political position that it took. This narrative asserts that the Communists actively proposed and defended the United Front, which was formally established in 1937, with the Nationalists throughout the war. Without their relentless efforts to unite with the Nationalists to fight Japan, it would have been impossible for China to eventually win the war (Liang 2005, 37-43). It appears that the “bulwark” narrative attributes the Communists’ contribution more to its political position and less to its military

engagement during the war. There is no doubt that the Communists fought guerrilla warfare with Japan at the “rear,” but a comparison of the military engagement by the Communists and the Nationalists would indicate the prominent role of the Nationalists on the battlefield. The Communists launched one major military operation against Japan (Wang 2000, 166), while the Nationalists fought twenty-three campaigns between 1937 and 1945 (Van de Ven 2003, 210; Wang 2000, 166). To be sure, the “bulwark” narrative politicizes a way of remembering the war that honors the Communists for its contributions.

In contrast to the role of the Communists as national savior, the Nationalists have been remembered much less positively in the political discourse of the PRC. This was particularly the case in the Mao era when the central government systematically delegitimized memories of the Nationalists’ contributions to the war effort. The Nationalists were stigmatized as a class enemy that had betrayed the United Front, and their contribution in the war was dismissed as insignificant. Beginning in the 1950s, the government obstructed the public commemoration of the Nationalists by demolishing shrines, cemeteries, and monuments. These commemorative sites were initially built by the Nationalist government during the war in commemoration of the Nationalists’ soldiers who died during the war (Chang 2012, 1-46). Under the Communist regime, these sites were classified as counterrevolutionary relics and became immediately subject to systematic demolition. In consequence, cemeteries of Nationalist soldiers suffered severe damage. The tombstones of thousands of soldiers were vandalized, and the ashes were exhumed and thrown away (Tsui 2020).

Beginning in the 1980s, the CCP discarded the old narrative, which mainly focused on the purported Nationalist betrayal of the United



Front. Instead, the new narrative gave a more positive evaluation of the Nationalists' contribution in the war. This narrative no longer emphasized the ideological and political conflict between the Communists and the Nationalists, but it redefined the Nationalists as an indispensable force in the resistance that had made sacrifices for national liberation. Some Nationalist figures were rehabilitated, including Chiang Kai-shek and many generals who had been discredited by the CCP during the Mao years (Coble 2007, 402; Weatherley and Zhang 2017, 120). Textbooks published in the late 1980s for the first time included the Nationalists-led military campaigns against Japan. New war films also portrayed the Nationalists in a more positive light (He 2007, 57). Museums exhibited photographs and historical relics of former Nationalist generals and soldiers. One major reason for the change in narrative can be attributed to the PRC's policy on Taiwan since the 1980s. Beijing adopted a conciliatory strategy to lure Taiwan into an agreement of reunification with the PRC. The Nationalists, then the ruling party in Taiwan, were regarded as an ally rather than a foe for Beijing as Taiwan emerged as a multiparty democracy. The reunification with Taiwan had now become a question of national pride. This strategy also aimed to forge a shared historical consciousness between mainland China and Taiwan and to counter the tendency among Taiwanese nationalists towards disconnecting Taiwan's history and culture from that of the Chinese mainland.

The change in the PRC's remembering of the Nationalists is also evident in the representation of the Nationalists in museums. In general, the exhibitions in public museums pay only limited attention to the role of Nationalists in the war. One of the few public museums in the PRC that acknowledge the Nationalists is the Museum of War of Resistance against Japan in Beijing. The hall of the museum acknowledges the role played by the Nationalists in the key battlefields of

Taierzhuang, Taiyuan and Wuhan. Zhang Zizhong, Li Zongren and other lesser-known Nationalist generals are commended, and the Nationalists are praised for their participation in Burma. There is also a large Nationalist flag in one of the main halls right next to the picture of Chinese premier Zhou Enlai (Weatherley and Zhang 2017, 120). A museum dedicated specifically to the Nationalists' war effort is one of the many museums included in the private Jianchuan Museum Cluster. It is located in a historic small town on the outskirts of Chengdu, in southwestern China. Among its thirty individual museums dedicated to a particular theme, the "Frontal Battlefield Hall" is built to honor the legacy of the Nationalists. However, this hall is overshadowed by the "Mainstay Hall," which is built specifically for honoring the Communists' war efforts. The space of the "Frontal Battlefield Hall" is only half of the "Mainstay Hall." The latter has a much richer variety of exhibits than the former, housing historical photographs, documents, and materials in the war.

Memories of Japan's role in the war have gone through a process of partial oblivion to resurrection in the PRC. In the Mao era, the state discouraged memories of the war and Japanese war atrocities in general. Instead, the CCP constructed a heroic narrative of the war in which revolutionary martyrs and the victory of the revolution were worshipped. Japanese atrocities such as the Nanjing Massacre were rarely mentioned in popular publications such as textbooks and newspapers. Even Mao's writings and speeches made no specific reference to the Nanjing Massacre (Seo 2008, 382). The government also discouraged serious investigation into it. In 1962, historians at Nanjing University completed a manuscript on the Nanjing Massacre, which put together photographs, statistics, and interviews with survivors. The Chinese authorities immediately classified the manuscript instead of allowing it to be published (Eykholt 2000, 25). It was not until 1979 that the authorities released the

manuscript as an internal document that was circulated, but only among a small number of high-level government officials (Li and Huang 2017, 15). Yang holds a different view that the Nanjing Massacre was widely presented in such platforms as memoirs and museums in the Mao era (2018). While the Chinese government did not completely erase the Nanjing Massacre from public memory in the Mao era, it is true that they avoided explicitly exposing Japanese atrocities in public. There were hardly any published records of memoirs about the Nanjing Massacre during this period and the government did not build any museum to commemorate the victims of the Nanjing Massacre either. Further, it remains unclear whether the Nanjing Massacre was widely remembered in the private sphere. This is because many survivors of the Nanjing Massacre were killed by the persecution in the Mao era, and their cemeteries were demolished. It is plausible that in the first three decades of the Communist rule, the Nanjing Massacre was largely neglected, if not forgotten, in public memory.

In the Mao era, the PRC policy towards Japan was designed to shelve the question of Japan's aggression. In the 1950s, the PRC was working to counteract the threat of the American containment policy against the Communist government in mainland China and its support for the Nationalist government in Taiwan. Beijing implemented "people's diplomacy" towards Japan, a semi-official diplomatic campaign which was aimed to change Tokyo's non-recognition of Beijing and undercut its security alliance with Washington (He 2007, 47). Towards the end of the 1960s, the PRC began to cooperate with Japan as part of Mao's strategy to confront the Soviet Union (Reilly 2011, 469). Following the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations in 1972, Beijing avoided historical disputes and reached a compromise with Tokyo over the issue of Japanese war responsibility—at least temporarily.

During this period, it appears that the Chinese government was reluctant to confront Japan with the question of Japanese war responsibility. Discourses of war memory drew a clear line between "a handful of Japanese militarists" and ordinary "Japanese people." School textbooks never denounced Japan and the Japanese people, but instead used the terms "Japanese imperialism" or "Japanese militarism" to refer to the bearer of Japan's war responsibility in an attempt to develop a favorable impression of the PRC in Japan (He 2007, 47). To be sure, the differentiation between "good" Japanese and "bad" Japanese is a diplomatic tactic used by Beijing to facilitate the normalization of diplomatic relations between the PRC and Japan. It also corresponds to Mao's lines of class struggle which denounced Japanese militarists as a class enemy and sympathized with ordinary Japanese and their status as victims of their government's misguided imperialist ventures.

It was only the emergence of historical revisionism in 1980s Japan that triggered a change in the PRC's policy. When the Japanese textbook controversy erupted in 1982 and again in 1986, Beijing condemned what they perceived as the revival of militarist tendencies among Japanese leaders, and pressed Tokyo to correct the historical interpretations of textbooks in question. The official visits by Japanese prime ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine in 1985, 1996 and 2001 also triggered vehement criticism from Beijing (Saito 2016, 62-67). From the 1980s on, Beijing contended with Tokyo over Japan's approach to the commemoration of the war. Beijing's confrontational approach to historical issues with Japan is clearly a departure from the conciliatory policy that the Chinese government pursued in the Mao era.

The PRC's collective remembering of Japan's role in the war fully revived in the post-Mao era. In the 1980s, the Chinese government lifted the restrictions on the memories of

Japanese war atrocities. Debates over Japan's war atrocities began to appear in academic research, in general publications and in popular culture. Many academic works on Japan's aggression in wartime China were published to expose Japanese brutality in the war. Research on the Nanjing Massacre, in particular, has developed rapidly with generous government sponsorship. In 1984, a large-scale investigation of survivors and witnesses of the Nanjing Massacre was conducted for the first time, and several research institutes were set up in Nanjing to advance this research. A research institute was established in 2011 in Shanghai to investigate the Tokyo Trial and Japanese war crimes. Numerous books intended for the general readership have also been released to promote the memory of the Nanjing Massacre, including translations of works by the American journalist Iris Chang, Japanese historian Kasahara Tokushi, a leading authority of the Sino-Japanese War, and German businessman John Rabe, a witness of the Nanjing Massacre. Japanese veterans' trips to China for confession have been frequently covered in Chinese television. The rejuvenation of remembering Japan's role in the war in Chinese academia and mass media indicates the end of the class struggle-oriented policy adopted by the CCP during the Mao period. The CCP now no longer favors a class-based memory of the war that distinguishes between the Japanese people and the Japanese imperialists, but instead promotes a way of remembering Japanese war responsibility that transcends class boundaries. In other words, this new form of war memory assumes the unity of Japanese nation along national lines and transfers Japan's war responsibility from the Japanese imperialists to the entire Japanese people.

### **Memoirs and Oral Histories of Veterans**

The memoirs and oral accounts of Chinese

veterans are private memories that describe the cruelty of the war and the human experiences in the war. This alternative form of memory is markedly different from the official war memory, which tends to emphasize heroism and nationalism and to neglect the personal experiences of ordinary people as well as their attitudes towards the Chinese wartime regime. While the discourse of veterans' memoirs retains nationalist elements that emphasize collective sacrifice for national salvation in the war, it records some voices of family relationships and human affection. These narratives deviate from those of the official war memory, but they should not be viewed as a marginalized form of alternative memory that fundamentally challenges the official state discourse of war memory. It is true that these alternative narratives contradict the monolithic images of war portrayed in official memory discourses, but they are mostly products of state sponsorship that supports the official view of the war. Therefore, the accounts of memoirs and oral histories of veterans are essentially a variation or adjustment of the official war memory, which do not necessarily constitute counter memory that is produced to resist the official state discourse of war memory. In this sense, these private memories of the war are unreliable representations of war experience. They neither honestly reflect how veterans remember the war now nor truthfully record what happened on the battlefield in the war years.

Memoirs of veterans were absent in the PRC's public sphere until the early 1980s. The lack of veterans' memoirs in the early period of the Communist rule can be attributed to state repression. Since the victory of the Communist revolution in 1949, veterans, especially those who previously fought with the Nationalists, were not motivated to have their memoirs published because they were ostracized by the state. In the 1950s, the CCP launched nationwide campaigns to eliminate Nationalist veterans from public life, labeling many of them

“rightists,” “counterrevolutionaries” and “enemies of people.” As a result, veterans suffered from persecution, discrimination, and contempt. Many of them were humiliated and tortured to death, or committed suicide (Diamant 2001, 162-163; Weatherley and Zhang 2017, 127-130 and 133-134). The veterans were in extremely difficult political circumstances, so it was highly unlikely for them to publish what they had been through in the war years.

After the death of Mao in 1976, the CCP gradually permitted state agencies to record the wartime experiences of veterans. Many institutions began to invest resources to collect testimonies of veterans. In the 1980s, compiling war testimonies of veterans was not an endeavor of national coordination, but mainly the work organized by local officials. Most compilations focused on the provincial or municipal experience of the war, so testimonies reflected more of a localized remembering of the war (Moore 2011, 411-412). In recent years, the CCP has emphasized the importance of unifying national identity and has come to regard the war as a historical turning point shifting the trajectory from national humiliation to national rejuvenation. Veterans’ testimony of the war would help build a common national narrative and help shape a shared national identity. Since 2015, the Chinese government has funded various government projects to collect and publish the testimonies of veterans. Thus far, the National Office of Social Sciences under the Ministry of Propaganda has funded numerous research projects of this sort, including an extensive project on the oral history of veterans, which was approved in 2016 and is expected to be completed in 2025. This project involves a wide range of government agencies, including the Historical Research Center of the Central Committee of the CCP, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television, and the National Archives. Various propaganda departments and the history offices of the CCP

in central and local governments also support these investigations.

Meanwhile, academic and cultural institutions across the country have put the collection of the oral testimonies of veterans on their research agenda. In 2015, a scholar from Nanjing Normal University launched a project that records veterans’ oral histories of the war. Two other similar projects were also launched in 2015 and 2018. These projects include forms of social engagement as part of their research agenda. The Nanjing Civil Anti-Japanese War Museum in collaboration with the research projects sponsored public participation through a series of workshops organized to teach the public how to collect oral histories (Li 2020, 33). Many students have been recruited as volunteers from universities across the country to interview veterans. This is not to say, however, that the voices of veterans are accurately reflected in the recorded findings of these projects. The state still closely monitors the research process, from selecting which veterans to interview to what interviewees are supposed to say for these projects (Li 2020, 33).

The state-sponsored oral history projects of veterans have also facilitated the publication of war memoirs. Since the 2000s, many former servicemen have published their war experiences. These works range from personal accounts of generals and soldiers to recollections of specific battles (Bai 2013; Fang 2013; Wen 2005; You 2011; Zhu 2010). There are also some works which record the experiences of veterans in specific provincial areas, such as Shanxi, Zhejiang, Hunan, and the northeastern provinces (Fang 2012; Hu nan tu shu guan 2013; Li 2012; Zhang 2005). It is worth noting that many of these works are written not by the veterans, but rather by members of the oral history projects on the behalf of veterans. While the Chinese government has lifted the ban on the publication of war memoirs, the narrative of



memoirs is still subject to tight government censorship. Censors do not allow veterans to portray the war as they experienced it, but instead require them to toe the official line, which construes the war as a heroic struggle against Japanese imperialism. As a private form of war memory, however, the narratives in the memoirs of veterans inevitably clash with official historical narratives. Some memoirs lack accounts of the “heroism” of the Communists and the “cowardice” of the Nationalists which are often described in official war memories, and even express sympathy for the Nationalists (Moore 2011, 412). Such narratives have often been extensively edited or even excised altogether by the publisher. The censored memoirs tend to avoid descriptions of the effects of war on people, as well as expressions of veterans’ grief of personal loss and deprivation during the war. Thus, while the memoirs reflect to some extent the war experiences of the veterans, they are by no means genuine accounts that truthfully record how veterans remember the war, and even less so how they experienced the war.

In addition to the government efforts, the sense of urgency of the public to record and preserve wartime experiences resulted in an oral history documentary film project titled *My War of Resistance (wode kangzhan)* in the early 2010s, a period when some limited space became available for mild critical views of the official war memory to appear in Chinese media. The documentary was produced by Cui Yongyuan, a popular host who had worked for national television. *My War of Resistance* documents personal stories of many individuals during the period from 1931 to 1945. The project constitutes an enormous investment of time and energy. Cui Yongyuan spent eight years and more than 130 million yuan to produce the documentary. In the eight years since 2002, Cui interviewed more than 3,500 people with direct war experiences, including 400 Nationalist and Communist veterans

(Weatherley and Zhang 2017, 124). The documentary has two seasons with a total of sixty-two episodes. The first season (thirty-two episodes) was screened on the Internet first, which allowed it to attract widespread attention. Then it was broadcast simultaneously on eighty-five TV stations across the country. The second season (thirty episodes) was released in 2011. Each episode has a thematic focus and lasts about thirty minutes.

*My War of Resistance* attempts to reproduce the overall situation of the Second Sino-Japanese War for the audience. The unique feature of the documentary is that it records the experiences of “little men,” or the ordinary individuals in the war. It tells the stories of different social groups such as veterans, civilians, and Chinese local collaborators who worked for the Japanese military in Japanese occupied zones. The focus of the documentary is the stories of Nationalist veterans, most of whom were soldiers and low-level officials. The documentary covers the daily life of Nationalist veterans in the war, including their love stories and suffering on the battlefield. The documentary reveals the veterans as unhappy men when they recount their painful experiences. In contrast to the heroic narratives of the official war memories, veterans’ memories of the war experience in *My War of Resistance* are invariably imbued with feelings of helplessness, frustration, and anguish.

## Conclusion

Memory of the Second Sino-Japanese War in the PRC is an endeavor of myth-making. The main components of the myth are ways of remembering the Communists, the Nationalists and Japan. The Communists are the backbone force of anti-Japanese resistance; Japan represents evil; and the role of the Nationalists has gradually changed from evil to positive, but still subordinate to the CCP. The myth-making

of the war is particularly evident in recent years when the PRC redefined the nature of the war by extending its time frame from eight years to fourteen years in school textbooks. The PRC's war memory is a mix of narratives of resistance, victim, and victor. In the Mao era, the victor narrative dominated war memory. Narratives of resistance and victimhood gradually developed in the post-Mao era. The resistance narrative is constructed to cultivate a sense of national belonging and establish national identity. The victor narrative is essentially a revolutionary narrative of class struggle which often appears in official speeches at commemorative events. The victim narrative often appears in popular culture, newspapers, academic publications, and discussions in intellectual circles. It promotes a way of remembering Chinese suffering from the Japanese war atrocities in the war. The victor narrative is based on class struggle, while the resistance and victim narratives are based on nationalism. The PRC strictly controls the remembering and commemoration of the war, and the articulation of the war memory through media and institutions closely follows political conditions. In the Mao era, the state implemented a policy of amnesia about the war, which discouraged collective remembering of Japanese atrocities. The state banned the publication of research on this subject and silenced many veterans through political persecution. Since the 1980s, the ban has been lifted to a certain extent, but the narratives of war memory still largely conform to the official line of the CCP.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Various short-lived regimes existed as collaborators in wartime China. The most well-known cases are the Wang Jingwei government which was established in Nanjing in 1940 and collapsed at the end of the war in 1945, and Manchukuo which was a client state set up by the Japanese Kwantung Army in Manchuria in 1932 and ended with Japanese surrender in 1945. For a general survey of Chinese collaboration with Japanese, see Barrett and Shyu 2011 and Brook 2005.