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### Citation

Chang, V. K. L. (2022). China's new historical statecraft: reviving the Second World War for national rejuvenation. *International Affairs*, 98(3), 1053–1069. doi:10.1093/ia/iia021

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3281124>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# China's new historical statecraft: reviving the Second World War for national rejuvenation

VINCENT K. L. CHANG

The memory of the Second World War has recently seen a remarkable revival in the People's Republic of China (PRC). This was epitomized in the 2015 commemoration of the 70th anniversary of Victory over Japan Day (V-J Day), which saw Xi Jinping overlooking a massive military parade and addressing world leaders from atop the Tiananmen rostrum in the heart of Beijing. Most western state leaders shunned the extravagant display of military might in China's capital, while the international media questioned the historical veracity of official Chinese accounts of the Second World War. An analyst writing for *The Diplomat*, for example, commented that 'we should be offended' by Beijing's depiction of the circumstances surrounding the Chinese victory of 1945, adding that the Chinese are 'the worst offenders in distorting, re-writing, or in many cases nullifying history for political purposes'.<sup>1</sup> Another observer cited a promotional poster for the 2015 Chinese state-sponsored film *Cairo Declaration* (*Kailuo xuanyan*) to argue that 'China' was 'spreading distortions' about the war.<sup>2</sup> These criticisms came several years before China was first accused by western governments of running misinformation campaigns in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Although the Chinese view of the Second World War may indeed 'strike us as distorted' and cause some observers to 'roll their eyes',<sup>3</sup> it is remarkable that the claims of distortion are rarely substantiated. Meanwhile, there are renowned historians who contend that China's renewed interest in the war shows that the country is 'normalizing' its wartime experience. One of the leading international experts on China's Second World War history, Rana Mitter, wrote in 2010 that 'the history of China's wartime experience is becoming historiographically both globalized and normalized', and that he sees 'trends similar to those seen in the

<sup>1</sup> Randall Schriver, 'China has its own problems with history', *The Diplomat*, 31 Aug. 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/08/china-has-its-own-problems-with-history>. (All URLs cited in this article were accessible on 6 March 2022.)

<sup>2</sup> The poster included a photo of an actor portraying Mao Zedong, thereby creating the impression that the Communist leader was present at the historic 1943 summit in Cairo that brought together US President Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Churchill and China's Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek. The poster was the subject of widespread scorn in China, including in state media. The film itself does not place Mao at the event, and other film posters portrayed leaders who were actually present. See Richard Sisk, 'China distorts history ahead of World War II commemoration', *Military.com*, 17 Aug. 2015, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2015/08/17/china-distorts-history-ahead-of-world-war-ii-commemoration.html>.

<sup>3</sup> A. E. Clark, 'China's regime rewrites World War II history', *Law and Liberty*, 27 May 2021, <https://lawliberty.org/book-review/chinas-regime-rewrites-world-war-ii-history>.

interpretation of the wartime experience in other belligerent countries'.<sup>4</sup> Mitter went on to reinforce this claim that China is 'normalizing' its experience of the war and joining globalized discussions of the war's legacy in his 2020 book on war memory in China.<sup>5</sup>

This article asks how these diverging positions can be explained and perhaps reconciled. Comparing official accounts with the historical record, the analysis shows that Beijing's desire for national unity and international recognition has led it to adopt a more inclusive, nuanced and historically accurate narrative of the Second World War than ever before, one that does not rely on deliberate falsehoods or fabrications. While significant gaps remain in Beijing's stylized reading, similar selectivity is not uncommon elsewhere. What is uncommon is the increased degree of control the party-state holds over the historical narrative and the way it weaponizes this in its domestic and international discourses. The failure to distinguish between the mobilization of the past and questions of historical accuracy accounts for some of the confusion in this debate.

Drawing on the concept of historical statecraft, this study details how the Chinese party-state, following the recent buildup of tensions with the West, is increasingly relying on the renewed memory of the Second World War to raise the cost of internal and external opposition to its policies, thereby fostering and reinforcing an inwardly directed nationalism. In making this argument, the analysis contributes to current debates pertaining to the nature of collective-memory making and the mutually constitutive relationship between state-led and popular nationalism in China.<sup>6</sup> The article provides new insights into Beijing's recent efforts to reshape and mobilize the memory of the Second World War in China to close the ranks of the Chinese people and admonish the outside world at what it sees as a critical juncture in its nation-building project.

## Multiple wartime histories: China's three-way division

To understand how the Chinese party-state uses war memory for political purposes, it is necessary to recognize the diversity of historical experiences the war brought. In China, the Second World War started in July 1937—or, on Beijing's official reading, as early as September 1931, with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and other parts of eastern China. In October 1938, Japan's rapid advance came to a halt around Wuhan, in central China, after Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government broke the dykes of the Yellow River, flooding vast swathes of land. From this moment, China's war experience was marked by a three-way division

<sup>4</sup> Rana Mitter, 'Changed by war: the changing historiography of wartime China and new interpretations of modern Chinese history', *Chinese Historical Review* 17: 1, 2010, pp. 85, 91.

<sup>5</sup> Rana Mitter, *China's good war: how World War II is shaping a new nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2020), p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Peter H. Gries, *China's new nationalism: pride, politics, and diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 45–46; Vincent K. L. Chang, 'Exemplifying national unity and victory in local state museums: Chongqing and the new paradigm of official World War II memory in China', *Journal of Contemporary China*, publ. online Jan. 2022, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2022.2031004.

that would last for much of the rest of the war.<sup>7</sup> The eastern regions, where the country's main transport links and cities were located, including the national capital Nanjing, were in the hands of the Japanese occupation forces and later several Chinese collaborationist governments. China's interior and the south-west were controlled by Chiang Kai-shek's evacuated government, with the temporary war capital Chongqing as its centre of power. The north-west and parts of central China were the domain of the Chinese Communists, who had set up their headquarters at Yan'an in late 1935 after their Long March escape from Chiang's pursuing government forces.

The wartime experiences of the Chinese people varied significantly between these regions. In the occupied eastern parts, it was marked by immense atrocities, traumas and dilemmas of collaboration and resistance similar in many ways to those in the parts of mainland Europe under German occupation. The Nanjing Massacre alone—the notorious episode of killing and sexual violence by the Japanese military that began in December 1937—left hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians dead, disfigured and displaced. More than a year later, a collaborationist government was set up in Nanjing under Wang Jingwei, which would maintain diplomatic relations with Berlin and Vichy France. In cities such as Nanjing and Shanghai, many Chinese found themselves compelled to accommodate the occupying forces, either as a survival strategy or, in some cases, out of a belief that the Japanese brought solutions to China's problems.<sup>8</sup>

The experience in unoccupied Chongqing was of an entirely different order, and perhaps somewhat reminiscent of that of wartime London. Here, in China's wartime capital, the displaced Nationalist government agencies and elites gathered together from all over the country, and from 1942 the main Allied powers were all represented there.<sup>9</sup> At his mountain-top headquarters in Chongqing, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek met with senior Allied commanders and directed China's national resistance and war planning.<sup>10</sup> The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also had a public office in the city, led by the future premier Zhou Enlai. Its presence in the war capital was a result of the uneasy alliance the two rival parties had formed in 1937 to resist the common foreign enemy. Between 1938 and 1943, Chongqing was bombed numerous times by Japanese forces in the unsuccessful attempt to break Chinese morale. The Japanese surrender in August 1945 prompted days of victory celebrations in the streets of Chongqing, followed by unsuccessful talks between the Guomindang (GMD) and the CCP on a future coalition government.

Communist leader Mao Zedong spent the war in the remote enclave of Yan'an in north-central China, expanding the CCP's power base and securing his leadership. Here Mao penned major works on the implementation of Marxism in China, which cemented his position as the party's ideological and political leader. Among

<sup>7</sup> Rana Mitter, *China's war with Japan 1937–1945: the struggle for survival* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese agents and local elites in wartime China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Vincent K. L. Chang and Yong Zhou, 'Redefining wartime Chongqing: international capital of a global power in the making, 1938–46', *Modern Asian Studies* 51: 3, 2017, p. 588.

<sup>10</sup> Mitter, *China's good war*, p. 180; Chang, 'Exemplifying national unity'.

his most important wartime writings was *On protracted war*, a long essay on China's military prospects which drew on late-night study group discussions of Clausewitz's book *On war* and was published in July 1938 to counter defeatism and boost morale after China's latest military setbacks.<sup>11</sup> As he had in his talks with Edgar Snow in July 1936, Mao emphasized in the pamphlet that the only path to victory was for the Chinese people to fight a nationwide protracted war; and, to that end, it must persevere with the united front between the GMD and the CCP and several smaller political parties.<sup>12</sup> The CCP had first begun to advocate the idea of a national united front as early as 1933, and it was a combination of realism—with the party's own survival at stake as the weaker side in the civil war—and pressure from Moscow that had led Mao eventually to accept Chiang's leadership in such a temporary coalition.<sup>13</sup> After the united front was formed, Chiang adopted a similar unifying rhetoric in his public speeches.<sup>14</sup>

Recent scholarship has yielded important advances and revisions in the understanding of China's wartime past, including a more nuanced assessment of the role in and contributions to the war effort of the Chinese Nationalists, whose stigmatization as morally corrupted and politically inept has increasingly been challenged since the end of the Cold War.<sup>15</sup> However, despite these scholarly advances, significant work remains to be done on each of the three war regions. Contrary to developments in Europe, scholarship on China's occupied regions and wartime collaboration remains an underdeveloped area of war historiography.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, while the wartime history of Chongqing has begun to attract scholarly interest, most studies disregard the CCP's wartime presence in the Guomindang-controlled capital, often portraying Chongqing as a Nationalist bastion and ignoring its role as the operational seat of the wartime united front between the GMD and CCP.<sup>17</sup> As shown in the analysis that follows, these blind spots have allowed misperceptions in analyses of war commemoration to persist.

## Malleable memories: three paradigms from Mao to Xi

Historical narratives in the PRC are firmly controlled by central party and state institutions. This control is exercised through the standardization of educational works and exhibitions, censorship across all public domains and the allocation of research funding in academia. The literature distinguishes three broad paradigms of official Second World War commemoration in China associated with three successive political eras. Substantively, these three paradigms can be understood

<sup>11</sup> Hans van de Ven, *China at war: triumph and tragedy in the emergence of the new China 1937–1952* (London: Profile, 2017), p. 141.

<sup>12</sup> Mao Zedong, *On protracted war* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, repr. 2001; first publ. 1938), p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Hans van de Ven, *War and nationalism in China 1925–1945* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), pp. 173, 182, 187.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Chiang Kai-shek, *The collected wartime messages of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, 1937–1945*, vol. 2 (New York: John Day, 1946), pp. 41–6.

<sup>15</sup> Mitter, 'Changed by war', p. 85. A good example of this revisionist scholarship is Van de Ven's *War and nationalism*. A more recent contribution is Joseph W. Esherick and Matthew T. Combs, eds, *1943: China at the crossroads* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Mitter, *China's good war*, p. 103.

<sup>17</sup> Chang and Zhou, 'Redefining wartime Chongqing', p. 588.

as promulgating essentialized representations of the wartime experiences in each of the three regions discussed above.

The first paradigm exemplified the Marxist-Leninist class struggle rhetoric that defined the Mao era (1950–76). It portrayed China's war of resistance against Japan as part of a transnational revolutionary struggle between the progressive Chinese people, led by the CCP, and a reactionary 'clique' of Japanese imperialist militarists, aided by Chiang Kai-shek's feudal counter-revolutionaries.<sup>18</sup> Although there is a debate over the degree to which the war itself and the GMD's contributions to its outcome were commemorated during these years, it is clear that the overarching class struggle narrative left little room for recalling the GMD–CCP wartime united front.<sup>19</sup> The key historical 'lesson' was that it was the revolutionary heroism of the CCP, and particularly Mao's leadership, that had enabled the Chinese people to stand up against imperialist and feudal forces and reclaim their independence. This earliest paradigm essentially memorialized the wartime history of Yan'an through a carefully stylized tale in which the people's experiences in the Japanese-occupied or Nationalist-controlled areas played no significant role.

The second paradigm of war commemoration emerged during Deng Xiaoping's reform era in response to a series of internal and external developments that have been analysed extensively in the literature.<sup>20</sup> The response was to move away from Marxist-revolutionary narratives in which Japan barely featured and towards a nationalist reframing in which the history of Japanese aggression and Chinese victimization became the central trope. The aggressor/victim dichotomy that characterized this 'new remembering' thus shifted the emphasis from a triumphant CCP to an evil Japan, while portraying the Chinese people as passive and powerless.<sup>21</sup> This allowed for a more positive assessment of the Chinese Nationalists and hence of 'compatriots' in Taiwan, who were now portrayed as fellow victims rather than traitors. The new remembering, in summary, was the story of Japanese war atrocities and Chinese victimhood in formerly occupied China, as epitomized by the horrific war traumas of Nanjing.

Recent years have seen the emergence of a third paradigm of official war memory in China, marked by the return of victor narratives.<sup>22</sup> The new line, initiated under Hu Jintao in 2005 and accelerated under his successor Xi Jinping, represents a careful blend of the earlier two paradigms, with the nationalistic tenor of Deng's more inclusive model supercharged by the heroic triumphalism of the Maoist era. The result is an aspiring and empowering retelling that emphasizes

<sup>18</sup> Zhengting Wang, *Never forget national humiliation: historical memory in Chinese politics and foreign relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 86, 101; Brook, *Collaboration*, p. 243.

<sup>19</sup> On this debate, see Chan Yang, 'Ruthless manipulation or benevolent amnesia? The role of the history of the fifteen-year war in China's diplomacy towards Japan before the 1982 textbook incident', *Modern Asian Studies* 50: 5, 2016, pp. 1705–47.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed overview, see Qiang Zhang and Robert Weatherley, 'Owning up to the past: the KMT's role in the war against Japan and the impact on CCP legitimacy', *Pacific Review* 26: 3, 2013, pp. 224–6.

<sup>21</sup> Wang, *Never forget*, p. 102.

<sup>22</sup> Zhang and Weatherley, 'Owning up to the past', p. 227; Edward Vickers, 'Transcending victimhood: Japan in the public historical museums of Taiwan and the People's Republic of China', *China Perspectives*, no. 4, 2013, p. 23.

‘the victory of the Chinese people’ and China’s ‘national greatness’, in line with Xi’s mission for the Chinese people to ‘become strong’.<sup>23</sup> In this forward-looking reinterpretation, the GMD–CCP united front has been brought out of obscurity to emphasize that it was the CCP’s foresight and correct policy of uniting and mobilizing the nation against great odds that allowed the Chinese people to secure ultimate victory. The new paradigm essentially signifies the restoration and elevation of the memory of unoccupied and undefeated Chongqing, the victorious capital where the Nationalists and Communists worked hand in hand to reclaim China’s greatness.<sup>24</sup>

There is a significant genre of scholarship that examines the role of collective memory in Sino-Japanese relations. This strand of the literature has emerged mainly in connection with the shift from the first to the second paradigm, which saw the memory of Japanese atrocities taking centre stage in Chinese remembrance practices and spurred a fervent ‘apology diplomacy’ on the part of Beijing in its relations with Tokyo and as part of China’s rise as a contender for regional leadership. Most authors agree that the continuing disputes over the past are inseparably linked to ongoing contestations over power, security and territory between the two regional rivals, and hence are likely to persist for as long as these issues remain unresolved.<sup>25</sup> An exclusive focus on Sino-Japanese relations in studying China’s historical statecraft thus risks missing the bigger picture, as the next section shows. It is precisely this longstanding preoccupation with Chinese victimhood in the literature on war memory that has obfuscated the latest paradigm shift, which saw Japan’s role as the evil ‘other’ in official Chinese discourse reduced and subsumed into a broader set of external forces threatening China’s rejuvenation.<sup>26</sup>

Animating the expanding body of scholarship on historical memory in China is a key debate over the question of how much space the Chinese party-state allows for bottom-up memorialization activities, and to what extent grassroots memory can challenge state-sponsored narratives. Several recent works have explored the nature and scope of ‘alternative memory’ in Chinese war remembrance practices by analysing the recollections of CCP and GMD veterans, the diverse and sophisticated views of Chinese historians, the narratives presented in non-state museums, commercial media and films, private opinions posted on internet forums and variations in local remembrance cultures.<sup>27</sup> As noted above, Mitter sees the evolving narratives and the pluriform actors involved in informing these as an indication that China is ‘normalizing’ its experience of the war and ‘joining an increasingly globalized discussion of the war’s significance’ that continues to

<sup>23</sup> Vincent K. L. Chang, ‘Recalling victory, recounting greatness: Second World War remembrance in Xi Jinping’s China’, *China Quarterly*, no. 248, 2021, p. 1153.

<sup>24</sup> Chang, ‘Exemplifying national unity’.

<sup>25</sup> Gries, *China’s new nationalism*, p. 89. For a recent analysis, see Karl Gustafsson, ‘Understanding the persistence of history-related issues in Sino-Japanese relations: from memory to forgetting’, *International Politics*, no. 57, 2020, pp. 1047–62.

<sup>26</sup> Mitter, *China’s good war*, p. 214; Chang, ‘Recalling victory’, p. 1169.

<sup>27</sup> For an overview, see Jacqueline Zhenru Lin, ‘Remembering forgotten heroes and the idealisation of true love: veteran memorial activism in contemporary China’, *Memory Studies* 14: 4, 2021, pp. 1082, 1085. See also Yi Wang and Matthew M. Chew, ‘State, market, and the manufacturing of war memory: China’s television dramas on the War of Resistance against Japan’, *Memory Studies* 14: 4, 2021, p. 878.

gain traction.<sup>28</sup> However, many scholars find that the scope of alternative memory in China remains limited and is being further contracted under Xi, either to neuter the potentially erosive effects on the CCP's legacy of rehabilitating the Nationalists or in response to the mounting policy challenges during this critical hour of 'national rejuvenation'.<sup>29</sup>

## Mobilizing war memory to secure national rejuvenation

The decision to revive and repurpose the memory of the Second World War was formalized at a politburo meeting in Beijing on 30 July 2015, weeks before the 70th anniversary of V-J Day described above. Presiding over the study meeting in person, Xi Jinping observed that the current state of research into the history of the Chinese people's war of resistance against Japanese aggression was unsatisfactory, given the war's historic significance. Stressing the importance of a 'correct view' of history and effective propaganda work in that regard, Xi singled out three main themes that required closer attention: the great significance of the Chinese people's war; the war's important place in the global fight against fascism; and the central role of the CCP as the key to ultimate victory.<sup>30</sup> In retrospect, this closed-door meeting of the CCP's top leadership marked the definite shift from tropes of victimhood to tropes of victory as the central tenet of official Chinese discourse on the war.<sup>31</sup> Only recently have the policy implications of this shift started to become clear.

This section of the article explores the subsequent efforts by the Chinese party-state to revive and mobilize the memory of the Second World War for political ends. The analysis builds on the concept of historical statecraft, which entails the use of selective representations of the past to legitimize policy and construct and reinforce national self-identities.<sup>32</sup> This includes the strategic use of history by state actors in both domestic and international discourses. On the domestic level, the analysis focuses on Beijing's most recent efforts to monopolize war memory and mobilize it to enforce national unity. In the international realm, the analysis looks at Beijing's new 'memory diplomacy' *vis-à-vis* major powers and the international community at large. This diplomatic approach has subsumed the earlier practice of 'apology diplomacy', which was predominantly aimed at Japan. With its focus partly directed inwards, it is also distinct from the related concepts of 'cultural diplomacy' and 'heritage diplomacy' that have been used in studying the export and exchange of cultural forms.<sup>33</sup> The discussion moves on to consider the interplay between domestic and international discourses in China's historical statecraft.

<sup>28</sup> Mitter, *China's good war*, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> Zhang and Weatherley, 'Owning up to the past', p. 238; Chang, 'Exemplifying national unity'.

<sup>30</sup> 'Xi Jinping: rang lishi shuohua yong shishi fayan shenru kaizhan Zhongguo renmin kang-Ri zhanzheng yanjiu' [Xi Jinping: Let history speak with historical facts, carry out in-depth research on the Chinese people's anti-Japanese war], *Xinhua*, 31 July 2015, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/31/c\\_1116107416.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/31/c_1116107416.htm).

<sup>31</sup> Chang, 'Recalling victory', pp. 1153–4.

<sup>32</sup> Maximilian Mayer, 'China's historical statecraft and the return of history', *International Affairs* 94: 6, 2018, p. 1222.

<sup>33</sup> Tim Winter, 'Heritage diplomacy', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21: 10, 2015, p. 1007.



## Re-educating the people: China's 'great spirit'

The recalibration campaign began with Chinese academics, who were encouraged to unearth new archives and employ new resources, align local findings with national studies, deepen exchanges with Taiwanese scholars, and pursue international research collaborations to develop the 'correct view' of the war.<sup>34</sup> For some localities, this implied a validation of existing initiatives. This is particularly true for the Chongqing region, which as early as 2008 embarked on a municipality-wide programme aimed at restoring the memory of the city's historic role as the nerve centre of the second united front between the Nationalists and the Communists and as China's victorious wartime capital.<sup>35</sup> Substantial new funding was made available to support new research programmes aligned with the 'spirit' of Xi Jinping's 'important speech' on the study of the anti-Japanese war.<sup>36</sup> As for international cooperation in this area, however, while it has indeed increased over the years, this has not resulted in the 'globalization' of Chinese historiography of the war that some expected.<sup>37</sup> Chinese historians have largely shunned undertaking comparative histories or transnational analyses that place China's war experience within a wider regional perspective, while foreign researchers were not eligible for the new funding programmes. As a result, recent analyses have become more rather than less Sinocentric.<sup>38</sup> This trend fits well with the 'spirit' of Xi's important speeches, which frame the war in China as the *Chinese people's* war—a pivotal struggle for justice that 'started first', 'lasted longest' and saw 'the highest number of casualties' of all conflicts in the Second World War.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, scholars who ignore the new line place themselves at risk of being denounced as promoting 'historical nihilism' and sentenced to up to three years in prison under recently expanded defamation laws.<sup>40</sup>

Beyond academia, the general public has been immersed in the new narrative in a variety of ways, including through public commemorations, museum exhibitions, school curricula and media coverage. Notable examples include the establishment of two new national holidays to commemorate the war, the massive V-J Day commemoration in 2015 and the addition of new 'victory' halls at museums showcasing Chinese victimhood.<sup>41</sup> The unmistakable lesson promoted by the

<sup>34</sup> 'Xi Jinping: rang lishi shuohua'.

<sup>35</sup> Yong Zhou, Vincent K. L. Chang and Xiaohui Gong, 'The *Dahoufang* project in Chongqing and the restoration of a legacy', *Frontiers of History in China* 9: 4, 2014, pp. 611–27.

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. 'Guanyu zuzhi kaizhan 2019 nian Chongqing shi shehui kexue guihua xiangmu shenbao gongzuo de tongzhi' (Notice on organizing and carrying out the application for the 2019 Chongqing Municipal Social Science Planning Project), 4 April 2019, Chongqing shi jiaoyu kexue yanjiuyuan, 4 Sept. 2019, [http://www.cqjy.com/glbm/kyc1/tzgg20/content\\_7293](http://www.cqjy.com/glbm/kyc1/tzgg20/content_7293).

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. Mitter, 'Changed by war', pp. 85, 91.

<sup>38</sup> Chang, 'Recalling victory', p. 1169.

<sup>39</sup> Xi Jinping, speech at the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the victory of the Second World War, *China Daily*, 3 Sept. 2015, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015victoryanniv/2015-09/03/content\\_21783362.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015victoryanniv/2015-09/03/content_21783362.htm).

<sup>40</sup> Pamela K. Crossley, 'Xi's China is steamrolling its own history', *Foreign Policy*, 19 Jan. 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/29/xis-china-is-steamrolling-its-own-history>; 'Defaming martyrs, attacking police to be punished by new amendments to Criminal Law', *Global Times*, 28 Feb. 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1216750.shtml>.

<sup>41</sup> Fengqi Qian and Guo-Qiang Liu, 'Remembrance of the Nanjing Massacre in the globalised era: the memory

renewed discourse and in the recently reprinted history textbooks is that the Chinese people owe their victory and 'greatness' to their moral spirit, national unity, perseverance and unfailing patriotic loyalty. This core message is echoed in many popular Chinese war films and television dramas, notwithstanding variations and dilutions attributable to the involvement of non-state actors.<sup>42</sup> The practical goal of this hegemonic memory work, as the CCP envisages it, is to ensure that 'the people of all ethnic groups throughout the country' carry forward this 'great spirit' in safeguarding national independence and upholding the sovereignty and dignity of the motherland.<sup>43</sup> Past and present are connected in museum exhibitions by flanking the historical narrative with Xi's latest political slogans, as visitors are urged to unite closely under the aegis of the CCP to secure 'decisive victory' in the struggle of realizing the 'Chinese dream' of rejuvenation.<sup>44</sup>

With the long-awaited 'victory' of the Chinese people finally in sight, the national leadership worries that officials might waver or become complacent. As the Central Committee of the CCP underscored in deliberating on its latest historical resolution, 'the last leg of the journey marks the halfway point only'.<sup>45</sup> This concern explains the recent revival of *On protracted war*, Mao's famous war pamphlet discussed above. In October 2018, amid escalating US–China trade tensions, the work—which portrays the United States as a 'moribund imperialist'—was reprinted to mark the 80th anniversary of its original publication. Since then, it has been cited variously in the context of external challenges confronting the Chinese people, including the COVID-19 pandemic. At a politburo meeting in August 2020, party leaders observed that 'since many problems we face are long- and medium-term, resolving such problems is like fighting a protracted war'.<sup>46</sup> Mao's book has become required reading at the Central Party School of the CCP, while Chinese diplomats have been instructed by Xi to adopt a 'fighting spirit' in confronting the country's international challenges.<sup>47</sup> Apart from instilling a heightened sense of emergency, direction and unity in Chinese officials at what is perceived to be a critical juncture in the nation's history, reviving Mao's earlier writings also serves to bolster and sanitize his popular image in China. As Xi appears to be emulating Mao in aspiring to become the country's paramount leader for life, there might be good reason to draw attention away from the disastrous effects of Mao's later rule and towards his pre-1949 revolutionary record, which is viewed in China in a far more positive light.<sup>48</sup>

of victimisation, emotions and the rise of China', *China Report* 55: 2, 2019, p. 95.

<sup>42</sup> Zhang and Weatherley, 'Owning up to the past', p. 225; Wang and Chew, 'State, market', pp. 886–8.

<sup>43</sup> 'Xi Jinping: rang lishi shuohua'.

<sup>44</sup> See e.g. the main exhibition at the Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance against Japanese Aggression in Beijing, entitled 'Great victory, historical contribution' (2015), and the exhibition 'The wartime resistance years' of the China Three Gorges Museum at Chongqing (2018).

<sup>45</sup> 'Full text: communiqué of 6th plenary session of 19th CPC Central Committee', Xinhua, 11 Nov. 2021, [http://www.news.cn/english/2021-11/11/c\\_1310305166.htm](http://www.news.cn/english/2021-11/11/c_1310305166.htm).

<sup>46</sup> Wen Wang, 'Why China recalls "protracted war" history', *Global Times*, 3 Aug. 2020, <https://www.global-times.cn/page/202008/1196521.shtml>.

<sup>47</sup> Catherine Wong, 'US–China relations: Beijing takes pointers from Mao in protracted power struggle with US', *South China Morning Post*, 2 Aug. 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3143505/us-china-relations-beijing-takes-pointers-mao-protracted-power>.

<sup>48</sup> Van de Ven, *China at war*, p. 134.

## Staking the nation, shaming 'traitors'

'No force can ever undermine China's status or stop the Chinese people and nation from marching forward,' warned Xi Jinping in his 2019 speech commemorating the 70th anniversary of the PRC.<sup>49</sup> On 1 July 2021, in an address marking the centenary of the CCP, the general secretary added that any 'foreign force' attempting to do so would run into a 'great wall of steel' forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people.<sup>50</sup> The previous year, at a symposium commemorating the 75th anniversary of V-J Day, Xi had already observed that the Chinese people would never agree with any force that attempted to split them from the CCP.<sup>51</sup> He went on to explain that the Chinese people, under the CCP's leadership, had won a 'total victory' against Japanese fascism and had thereby demonstrated to the world their 'patriotism, national character, heroism, and strong will to win'. This 'great spirit' and 'great victory', Xi said, would 'always motivate the Chinese people to overcome all difficulties and obstacles and strive to achieve national rejuvenation'.<sup>52</sup> In the intense atmosphere that characterizes the final stage of China's long struggle for rejuvenation, the demand for national unity and patriotism on the part of all Chinese has come to pervade party discourse in virtually all policy domains.<sup>53</sup>

There has been no lack of figurative 'wars' in recent years for the Chinese people to fight and win under the CCP's guidance. In February 2020, Xi vowed to secure 'full victory' in the battle against the novel coronavirus, with China's main international news agency Xinhua portraying the Chinese leader as the 'commander of the people's war against the pandemic'.<sup>54</sup> Twelve months later, Xi declared 'complete victory' in the Chinese people's war against poverty, claiming to have lifted nearly 100 million people out of poverty since the beginning of his term.<sup>55</sup> In September 2021, when a deal with US prosecutors allowed Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou to return from Canada, an editorial in the *People's Daily* entitled 'No force can stop China's progress' explained the outcome to its domestic audience as a 'major victory for the Chinese people', made possible by 'the strong leadership of the CCP, the unremitting efforts of the Chinese government, and the strong support of the entire Chinese people'.<sup>56</sup> While the analysis stopped

<sup>49</sup> 'China focus: Xi says no force can ever undermine China's status', Xinhua, 1 Oct. 2019, [http://www.xinhua-net.com/english/2019-10/01/c\\_138442542.htm](http://www.xinhua-net.com/english/2019-10/01/c_138442542.htm).

<sup>50</sup> 'Xi focus—quotable quotes: highlights of Xi Jinping's remarks at CPC centenary ceremony', Xinhua, 1 July 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c\\_1310038364.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c_1310038364.htm).

<sup>51</sup> 'Xi focus: Xi stresses carrying forward great spirit of resisting aggression', Xinhua, 4 Sept. 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/04/c\\_139340869.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/04/c_139340869.htm).

<sup>52</sup> 'Xi focus—quotable quotes: Xi Jinping on carrying forward great spirit of resisting aggression', Xinhua, 3 Sept. 2021, [http://www.news.cn/english/2021-09/03/c\\_1310166590.htm](http://www.news.cn/english/2021-09/03/c_1310166590.htm).

<sup>53</sup> Lotus Ruan, Masashi Crete-Nishihata, Jeffrey Knockel, Ruohan Xiong and Jakub Dalek, 'The intermingling of state and private companies: analysing censorship of the 19th National Communist Party Congress on WeChat', *China Quarterly*, no. 246, 2020, p. 521.

<sup>54</sup> 'Xi focus: Xi vows to win people's war against novel coronavirus', Xinhua, 11 Feb. 2020, [http://www.xinhua-net.com/english/2020-02/11/c\\_138771934.htm](http://www.xinhua-net.com/english/2020-02/11/c_138771934.htm).

<sup>55</sup> 'Xi declares "complete victory" in eradicating absolute poverty in China', Xinhua, 25 Feb. 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/25/c\\_139765861.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/25/c_139765861.htm).

<sup>56</sup> 'Renmin ribao ping Meng Wanzhou huiguo: mei you renhe lilian nenggou zudang Zhongguo qianjin de bufa' [The *People's Daily* commentary on Meng Wanzhou's return to China: no force can stop China's progress], *Renmin wang*, 25 Sept. 2021, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0925/c1003-32236285.html>.

short of calling the United States an adversary in a people's war, the implication was clear to Chinese readers.

If all 'external forces' that threaten to undermine China's national rejuvenation are enemies of the nation, then all Chinese people aiding these forces must be traitors. Along with the stepped-up rhetoric and ubiquitous use of war metaphors in recent Chinese state propaganda, there has been a growing trend of publicly exposing 'traitors' at home and abroad. One example is Miles Yu (Yu Maochun), a Chinese-born American historian who wrote several books on China's Second World War history at the US Naval Academy before joining the Trump administration as a foreign policy adviser. An outspoken critic of the CCP and of Xi, whom he has described as a 'die-hard' believer in a 'bankrupt totalitarian ideology', Yu was portrayed in China as the mastermind behind Washington's hawkish line towards Beijing. In July 2020, Yu became the target of nationalist vitriol on the part of Chinese internet users, who abused him online as 'the dog who helped the abuser' and as betrayer of the motherland.<sup>57</sup> The trend was quickly picked up by the *Global Times*, the jingoistic tabloid overseen by the CCP's flagship *People's Daily* newspaper, which called Yu a 'vicious traitor who forgot his ancestors' and one of 'those parasites [who] sneakily suck the blood of their homeland, or their previous homeland, with the help of external forces'.<sup>58</sup> The state-endorsed hate campaign resulted in Yu's family disowning him and his alma mater in Chongqing erasing his name from a monument listing its honoured alumni.<sup>59</sup>

There are other examples of how the 'double-edged sword' of state-bred popular nationalism has exposed the party-state to constant pressure from the more radical nationalist voices in the country to denounce and pursue unpatriotic 'traitors'.<sup>60</sup> In August 2021, zealous nationalists unearthed photos taken three years earlier of the actor Zhang Zhehan posing against a background of blossoming cherry trees that—so a street-view comparison revealed—were situated at the compound of the controversial Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo. The 'revelation' triggered only a passive initial response from the *Global Times*, which just months before Zhang's visit had called on every Chinese to go to the Yasukuni shrine at least once 'to see Japan's dirtiest soul'.<sup>61</sup> A *People's Daily* online travel guide even once recommended the shrine as a top cherry blossom viewing spot.<sup>62</sup> But these

<sup>57</sup> 'Diu Chuanren zhi lian, hanjian Yu Maochun' [Losing the face of Sichuanese, traitor Yu Maochun], post on Guancha online media portal, 22 July 2020, <https://user.guancha.cn/main/content?id=351754>; 'Zhuzhou-weinü de hanjian zougou Yu Maochun' [Yu Maochun, the traitor and running dog who aids the abuser], social Q&A community Zhihu, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/165867990>.

<sup>58</sup> "'Maiguozai' Yu Maochun jiang bei ding zai lishi de chiru zhu shang" ['Traitor' Yu Maochun will be nailed to the pillar of shame in history], *Huanqiu*, 12 Aug. 2020, <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/3zRTsBnapTQ?qq-pf-to=pcqq.c2c>; Hu Xijin, 'See how Chinese dissidents suck their homeland's blood like parasites', *Global Times*, 21 Nov. 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202011/1207571.shtml>.

<sup>59</sup> Shunsuke Tabeta, 'Chinese-born Pompeo adviser blasted as "traitor" in China', *Nikkei Asia*, 25 Aug. 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/US-China-tensions/Chinese-born-Pompeo-adviser-blasted-as-traitor-in-China>.

<sup>60</sup> Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful patriots: nationalist protest in China's foreign relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 4–6, 247.

<sup>61</sup> 'Mei ge Zhongguo ren dou gai qu yici Jingguo shenshe, kan Riben zui zang de linghun!' [Every Chinese should go to the Yasukuni shrine once to see Japan's dirtiest soul!], *Huanqiu*, 15 Aug. 2017, <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnK4GuU>.

<sup>62</sup> Bingqing Yang, 'China's nationalist cancel culture', *The Diplomat*, 5 Sept. 2021, <https://thediplomat.com>.

mitigating circumstances did not stop Chinese online nationalists from venting their fury at the ‘dirty traitor’ Zhang.<sup>63</sup> In an instant, Zhang saw his budding career ‘cancelled’ as he was banned by state authorities from the entertainment industry and abandoned by his commercial sponsors (including two Japanese firms), and had his films, music and even public profile taken down from Chinese social media accounts. Although war memory is not directly at stake in these examples, the toxic framing of loyalty and betrayal that it sustains clearly plays an important role in the way Chinese nationalism is being perpetuated and shaped.

### *Globalizing the new narrative: memory diplomacy*

The discursive shift from victimhood to triumph in Beijing’s depictions of the war can also be seen in China’s diplomatic practice. Increasingly, the memory of the Second World War is invoked by Beijing not to support the rancorous ‘apology diplomacy’ *vis-à-vis* Japan of earlier decades but rather as part of a broader and more assertive practice of ‘memory diplomacy’ targeting global audiences. Again, this began in 2015, when Beijing, while holding the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council, called for reflection on the war’s outcomes during an ‘open debate’ in the Council which it had initiated to mark the 70th anniversary of V-J Day and the founding of the UN. In a note circulated by the Chinese representative earlier that year, Beijing had highlighted the direct link between victory in the Second World War and the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs codified in the UN Charter, urging member states to ‘respect each other’s core interests and major concerns as well as the social system and development path chosen by countries themselves’.<sup>64</sup> Presiding over the session in New York three weeks later, China’s state councillor and foreign minister Wang Yi elaborated on these notions.<sup>65</sup> He went on to do the same at other subsequent multilateral forums, including meetings of the BRICS countries and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and at the Munich Security Conference.

In these speeches, Chinese leaders advance several basic points. A first core message is that during the Second World War, the Chinese people stood firmly on the right side of history, enduring severe national sacrifice for the great cause of defeating fascism and restoring world peace.<sup>66</sup> The point foreign audiences are urged to absorb is that China, as the main war theatre in the East, ‘not only saved itself and its people from subjugation, but also gave strong support to the forces against aggression in the European and Pacific theatres, thus making a historic contribution to the victory of the World Anti-Fascist War’.<sup>67</sup>

com/2021/09/chinas-nationalist-cancel-culture.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Neidi yule jie de di yi hanjian Zhang Zhehan de chou’e zuilian’ [The ugly face of Zhang Zhehan, the number one traitor in the mainland entertainment industry], social Q&A community Zhihu, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/165867990>.

<sup>64</sup> Chinese Permanent Representative to Secretary-General of the UN, 3 Feb. 2015, UN S/2015/87, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Records of the 7389th meeting of the UN Security Council (UNSC), 23 Feb. 2015, UN S/PV.7389, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/788477>.

<sup>66</sup> Records of the 7389th meeting of the UNSC, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> Statement by Xi Jinping at the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly, 28 Sept. 2015, <https://gadebate>.

A further message these speeches seek to convey is that 'China' was one of the founders of the UN-based postwar international order. At the 2020 Munich Security Conference, for example, Wang Yi highlighted this supposedly unbroken continuity by observing that in 1945, China was 'the first founding member of the UN to sign its Charter' and up to today has stayed true to the UN's founding aspirations.<sup>68</sup> This framing serves several purposes of its own. First, it seeks to burnish China's credentials as a 'responsible stakeholder' in the international system and a provider of public goods, for example through its Belt and Road Initiative and COVID-19 'vaccine diplomacy', rather than a free rider at the world's expense.<sup>69</sup> Second, it allows Beijing to urge the international community to respect what it recognizes and (selectively) observes as the fundamental principles of the UN-based system: sovereign equality, territorial integrity and non-intervention.<sup>70</sup> Third, while presenting China as a rule-maker, not a rule-breaker, the self-framing as a co-architect of the international system also serves to underline Beijing's inherent right to propose reforms to that system and enrich it with 'new dimensions'. This opens up space for advancing its own visions of global governance, which emphasize common development over conflict, justice over hegemony, and win-win logic over zero-sum thinking.<sup>71</sup>

A final aim of Beijing's memory diplomacy is to safeguard the legal and political outcomes of the war and recall its 'unfinished business'. When, for example, Wang Yi stated that there are forces who are 'reluctant to recognize the truth [of the war] and even attempt to overturn the verdict and whitewash past crimes of aggression', he was simultaneously denouncing Japanese plans to transform its peace constitution and reasserting Beijing's claims on Taiwan and other disputed territories in its adjacent seas.<sup>72</sup> In December 2013, following a period of mounting tensions in the East and South China Seas, Chinese authorities and state media widely publicized the 70th anniversary of the Cairo Conference, citing the joint declaration of that summit as the main legal basis underpinning Beijing's claim to both Taiwan and the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.<sup>73</sup> In 2021, urging 'compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Straits [to] stand on the right side of history', Xi ominously warned 'secessionist' traitors in Taiwan to stop 'colluding' with foreign forces in resisting 'national reunification' or to face the trial of history.<sup>74</sup>

un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/70/70\_ZH\_en.pdf, pp. 1–2.

<sup>68</sup> 'FM Wang Yi's speech at 56th Munich Security Conference', *China Daily*, 16 Feb. 2020, <http://www.china-daily.com.cn/a/202002/16/WS5e490ce7a310128217277dc8.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Mitter, *China's good war*, p. 224.

<sup>70</sup> Rosemary Foot, "'Doing some things" in the Xi Jinping era: the United Nations as China's venue of choice', *International Affairs* 90: 5, 2014, pp. 1085–1100; Mitter, *China's good war*, p. 224.

<sup>71</sup> Records of the 7389th meeting of the UNSC, pp. 4–5.

<sup>72</sup> See e.g. Wang Xu, 'Japan urged to reflect on its aggression', *China Daily*, 16 Aug. 2021, <https://www.china-daily.com.cn/a/202108/15/WS6118e391a310efa1bd668ddo.html>.

<sup>73</sup> 'Japan ought to honor terms dictated by Cairo Declaration', *China.org*, 1 Dec. 2013, [http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2013-12/01/content\\_30768121\\_2.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2013-12/01/content_30768121_2.htm); 'Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei's remarks on the 70th anniversary of the issuance of the Cairo Declaration', 3 Dec. 2013, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2535\\_665405/201312/t20131203\\_696280.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/201312/t20131203_696280.html).

<sup>74</sup> Yang Sheng and Chen Qingqing, 'Xi stresses peaceful reunification, calls Taiwan secessionists "serious threat" to national rejuvenation', *Global Times*, 9 Oct. 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202110/1235838.shtml>.

These examples underscore the point that the threatening ‘other’ in Chinese war memory discourse is embodied no longer by Japan *per se* but rather by *any* external force that attempts to undermine the Chinese people’s historical mission of national rejuvenation. Increasingly, it is the United States—acting alone or in concert with ‘like-minded’ states—that has come to represent the main external threat, as tensions mount between Beijing and Washington over bilateral trade issues, regional security, the COVID-19 pandemic and global governance. In response to these developments, Beijing has recently expanded its practice of memory diplomacy to include bilateral efforts targeting the United States directly. In September 2020, marking the 75th anniversary of V-J Day, the Chinese and Russian ambassadors in Washington published a joint article on a US defence community platform in which they urged the US government to honour the history and spirit of the Second World War. Pointing to the special responsibility of major powers in the safeguarding of peace, multilateralism and win–win cooperation, the article took aim at what the two strategic partners perceive as US aggression, unilateralism and decoupling from the global economy.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, in bilateral meetings, Chinese and Russian leaders have exchanged pledges to ‘safeguard’ the victory and outcomes of the Second World War and support each other’s core interests, including on issues related to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and the South China Sea.<sup>76</sup> While there are no signs yet that Beijing’s new memory diplomacy has had any success in ‘educating’ its chief opponent, it has had the effect of deepening mutual trust and strategic alignment with Russia, its main global partner.<sup>77</sup>

Even in those instances where China’s memory diplomacy appears to be primarily directed at Japan, it increasingly plays out in the context of global alliance formation, as recent examples show. In July 2021, the Chinese Embassy in Canberra published a statement on its website claiming that the Chinese ambassador had excoriated his Japanese colleague at a diplomatic function over ‘nasty remarks’ and attempts to ‘blatantly whitewash’ Japanese war aggression.<sup>78</sup> The statement appeared just one day after the Japanese ambassador had publicly ‘applauded’ the way Australia had resisted Chinese economic pressure, adding that his own government was ‘struggling every day’ to manage its precarious relationship with China.<sup>79</sup> Predictably, the news elicited indignant reactions from users of Chinese online forums, who condemned both Australia’s colonial mindset and the ‘complex mentality of a Japanese society that is both arrogant and full of grievances’ as a result of its dependence on the United States.<sup>80</sup> China’s state

<sup>75</sup> Anatoly Antonov and Cui Tiankai, ‘Honor World War II with a better, shared future’, *Defense One*, 2 Sept. 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/09/honor-world-war-ii-better-shared-future/168191>.

<sup>76</sup> ‘Xi Jinping speaks with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the phone’, 25 Aug. 2021, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgvienna/eng/zgbd/t1902509.htm>.

<sup>77</sup> Alexander Korolev and Vladimir Portyakov, ‘Reluctant allies: system–unit dynamics and China–Russia relations’, *International Relations* 33: 1, 2019, pp. 57–9.

<sup>78</sup> ‘Chinese Embassy spokesperson’s remarks’, 22 July 2021, [http://au.china-embassy.org/eng/sghdxwfb\\_1/t1894240.htm](http://au.china-embassy.org/eng/sghdxwfb_1/t1894240.htm).

<sup>79</sup> ‘Japanese envoy says Tokyo “struggles every day” with China’, *The Mainichi*, 21 July 2021, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20210721/p2g/oom/oin/054000c>.

<sup>80</sup> ‘Ribei xiang qing Zhongguo dashi fuyan, jieguo bei weiwang jujue, yuanyin shi gongran meihua erzhan

media capitalized on this to criticize both Japan and Australia for their perceived roles in building an anti-China coalition.<sup>81</sup> The episode illustrates that as Beijing's memory diplomacy is taking on a progressively globalized form, it simultaneously functions as an important tool for placating nationalist audiences at home.

### **Historical statecraft: nationalist legitimacy at a critical hour**

Interpretivists and critical theorists hold that the constructed nature of discourse and the associated struggle over particular representations make it inherently political and value-laden. From this perspective, all narratives, including those addressing the past, are products of present-day interests and concerns rather than predetermined by past events, and hence are inherently distorted. Xi Jinping's new retelling of the Second World War memory is no exception, as this analysis has shown. As the party-state continuously seeks self-legitimization in the evolving and ever-challenging present, the official Chinese representation of the Second World War remains highly stylized, selective and increasingly subject to censorship and control.

Within this general context, however, Chinese official representations of the war paradoxically have become more nuanced and representative than ever before. A comparison between the historical record and official representations shows that the latter do not rely on deliberate falsehoods or deceptions. Moreover, the new paradigm is decidedly less distorted than that of the Mao era, which discursively reduced the war to a mere 'way-station' of the socialist revolution, in which neither the Japanese aggressors nor the Chinese Nationalist resisters, and not even the victimized Chinese people, had significant roles to play or any real agency.<sup>82</sup> Compared to the revolutionary orthodoxy of the Maoist era, recent historiography in China does far more justice to the varied and complex causes and effects of the Chinese war experience, including the role and contributions of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists.

This is not to say that there are no significant gaps in the official narrative following the 'nationalist' turn and the accompanying heightened control from the centre. Collaboration remains a no-go area, for example, while the contributions of the Allied forces to victory in the war, or of the Soviet Union to the establishment of the united front, are habitually minimized. This type of selectivity, however, is not fundamentally different from public war memory elsewhere, including in Europe, where nationalistic and otherwise selective narratives of the Second World War and subsequent decolonization conflicts likewise perpetuate blind spots and taboos in the name of veterans or victims. In so far as the old Maoist rhetoric has made way for nationalist interpretations and historiographical

zuixing' [Japan sought to invite the Chinese ambassador to a banquet but was politely rejected because it blatantly glorifies World War II crimes], post on online forum EasyWeb, 24 July 2021, [https://3g.163.com/dy/article\\_cambrian/GFLNFGOFo535NECV.html](https://3g.163.com/dy/article_cambrian/GFLNFGOFo535NECV.html).

<sup>81</sup> 'Japan's ambassador to Australia talks of peace but prepares for war', CGTN, 30 Aug. 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-08-30/Japan-s-ambassador-to-Australia-talks-of-peace-but-prepares-for-war-139c7eqW1K8/index.html>.

<sup>82</sup> Mitter, 'Changed by war', p. 85.



trends seen elsewhere, this supports Mitter's claim that the end of the Cold War caused a 'normalization' of China's war experience.

If Beijing's retelling of the war has become more accurate than ever, the question remains why it is so often rejected as strategic misinformation by western analysts. One explanation that this study has offered is a lack of attention in the literature not only to the history of the GMD–CCP united front but also to its historiographical value in enabling and enhancing CCP agency in historical memory. This may explain why observers often misconstrue Beijing's interpretation as advancing the claim that it was the CCP, and not the GMD, that directed and sacrificed the greatest number of troops in battles against Japan. This misses the essential point in Beijing's reading: that while the war efforts of the Nationalists (at the front lines) and the Communists (behind enemy lines) were complementary and equally indispensable, it was the CCP that made the critical contribution to victory by proposing, realizing and preserving the fragile but vital interparty alliance despite the GMD's (discursively amplified) defeatism, deceptive tactics and strategic mistakes in fighting the Japanese.<sup>83</sup> It is this inclusive patriotic spirit and far-sighted moral leadership, more than its military prowess, that the CCP is memorializing today and that explains, among other things, the recent revival of Mao's *On protracted war*.

In addition, disparities between Chinese and western understandings of the war arise to some degree from the unsettled status of ongoing historical debates and of persistent manifestations of 'victor's history', Eurocentrism and other potentially distortive elements of default understandings in the West. While it may be difficult (and would require a counterfactual analysis that would in any case be inconclusive) to assess the value of China's contribution to the final victory by pinning down over half a million Japanese troops as the Allies focused on Europe, that contribution cannot be dismissed out of hand.<sup>84</sup> In a related point, the idea that the atomic bombings were the decisive factor in Japan's surrender—a common assumption in many western analyses—is questioned by scholars in Japan and recently also in the West, who cite other critical factors underlying that decision.<sup>85</sup>

Perhaps the most important explanation for these persistent misperceptions, however, is the failure among observers to distinguish between questions of historical veracity and practices of historical statecraft. Whereas the historiography of the war can be considered to have normalized compared to earlier eras, this trend may have been obscured by the stark recent increase in both the scope and intensity of Beijing's use of the past to serve present political goals. On the domestic level, this study finds, war memory is mobilized no longer merely to educate the masses and imbue them with patriotism, but increasingly to sustain a 'moment-of-truth' emergency atmosphere in which any disobedience from the party line is publicly chastised as unpatriotic behaviour. In the realm of international politics, the memory of the Second World War serves no longer merely as a weapon with

<sup>83</sup> Chang, 'Recalling victory', p. 1159.

<sup>84</sup> Mitter, *China's war with Japan*, p. 5.

<sup>85</sup> For a recent contribution, see Richard Overly, *Blood and ruins: the great imperial war, 1931–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), p. 370.

which to fight Japanese militarism, but—somewhat ambivalently—as an instrument simultaneously to bolster Beijing's global leadership claims, criticize its main antagonist and build strategic trust with key partners.

The analysis of China's historical statecraft in this article underscores the depth and intricacy of the links between the domestic and international aspects of Beijing's historical statecraft.<sup>86</sup> China's foreign relations are no longer an isolated domain of civil officers engaged in warding off external influences or winning over foreign audiences. Instead, with an awareness of the threat of the 'double-edged sword' of Chinese nationalism, diplomacy has become a primary channel used by both the party-state and aspiring individual officials to showcase their nationalist credentials and cast messages for domestic audiences who demand a more strident foreign policy.<sup>87</sup> In this sense, China's 'memory diplomacy' is much less outwardly directed than it may first appear. To a significant degree, and much like the other aspects of its historical statecraft assessed in this article, it caters to and conciliates increasingly demanding domestic audiences. Like Beijing's controversial 'warrior diplomacy', its emerging memory diplomacy is thus a function of the constant negotiation between the top-down and bottom-up forces of nationalism, and reflects a readjustment of the balance to a point where the Chinese party-state feels compelled to prioritize domestic legitimacy over international goodwill, and sharp over soft power.

## Conclusion

China might be a latecomer among the many states that use the memory of the Second World War in the present as a moral foundation of national identity, but it has compensated for its tardiness in the intensity of its efforts. As the CCP perceives itself to be at the threshold of realizing the 'Chinese dream' and securing ultimate 'victory' for the Chinese people after more than a century of aspirational struggle, it is acutely aware not only of the momentousness of this self-constructed critical juncture but also of the potential dangers this entails for the success of its 'original mission'. It is this 'peculiar blend of superiority and insecurity', as Rosemary Foot has called it, that has prompted Beijing to revive and repurpose the memory of the Chinese people's war of resistance and recall the 'great spirit' of national unity.<sup>88</sup> With little for the CCP to gain from recalling the painful legacies of 'Red' history that tore Chinese society apart and isolated it from the rest of the world, few episodes of China's recent history fit Beijing's present goals better than the memory of the Second World War and of the united front that allowed the Chinese people to claim their just and inevitable victory. This increasingly central plank of China's historical statecraft merits serious attention from International Relations scholars and analysts.

<sup>86</sup> See also Mayer, 'China's historical statecraft', p. 1217.

<sup>87</sup> Weiss, *Powerful patriots*, pp. 36, 247; Robert Weatherley and Qiang Zhang, *History and nationalist legitimacy in contemporary China: a double-edged sword* (New York: Palgrave, 2017), p. 8; Yang, 'China's nationalist cancel culture'.

<sup>88</sup> Rosemary Foot, 'Remembering the past to secure the present: Versailles legacies in a resurgent China', *International Affairs* 95: 1, 2019, p. 159.