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Remembering Friends, Not Allies: World War II Memory in Contemporary China

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Despite efforts in the People's Republic of China (PRC) to normalise and refashion the memory of World War II for the purposes of domestic and international self-legitimation, the Chinese party-state has refrained from embracing the notion of 'Allies' in its official remembrance, barring a few notable exceptions. This article revisits the wartime relations between the Republic of China and the Commonwealth of Australia to outline the history, local memory and official remembrance of China's onetime Allied cooperation, while highlighting related trends in academic scholarship and heritage work.

A point in time: United as allies

The first half of 1941 saw tensions in the Asia Pacific surging to ominous levels. Having in the previous year launched its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere and acceded to the tripartite Axis pact, Imperial Japan signed a non-aggression treaty with Soviet Russia in April, thereby securing its northern rear and freeing up resources for a southward advance. Meanwhile, in war-torn China, which despite massive odds had been able to sustain its resistance against the invading Japanese forces since 1937, resurgent clashes between Chiang Kai-shek's ruling Nationalists and Mao Zedong's Communists threatened the survival of their fragile wartime alliance. This changing regional threat balance prompted the powers with vital interests in the region – the US, Britain, the Netherlands and Australia – to alter their strategies and take precautionary action. These powers stepped up their engagement with Chiang's government to prop up this first line of defence and help keep the almost one million Japanese troops in China bogged down, while hurrying to enhance their defence capabilities in British Malaysia, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies and Australia, in anticipation of an expansion of the war.

It is against this tense backdrop that China and Australia decided to upgrade their mutual ties. In a joint communiqué issued on 13 May 1941, the two governments declared:

China and Australia should have long ago entered into diplomatic relations, and in view of the present situation in the Pacific, it is imperative for the two countries to exchange diplomatic missions. It is confidently believed that henceforth the friendly relations between China and Australia will be greatly strengthened.¹



Figure 1. Australian Minister Eggleston poses with Chinese officials after presenting his credentials at Chongqing, source: Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum.

AUSTRALIE 澳 國		
銜 名	NOMS ET QUALITES	DAMES
特命全權公使 艾格登爵士	S. Exc. Sir Frederic William Eggleston Envoy à Extraordinaire et Ministre Plénipotentiaire	
二等秘書 華樂夫人	M. Keith Waller Deuxième Secrétaire	Mme. Waller
三等秘書 卜克	M. M. R. Hooker Troisième Secrétaire	
三等秘書 李貴芳	M. Charles Lee Troisième Secrétaire	

Figure 2. Excerpt of diplomatic list issued by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chongqing, October 1943, source: Estate of J. van den Berg (Dutch diplomat (1899–1982) who served as minister-counsellor at the time at the Dutch Embassy to China).

In view of Chiang's urgent need for regional allies, the move was hailed in Chinese official circles as marking the 'dawn of a new era of human relations in the southern Pacific'.² For Canberra, the decision had been informed by an acute realisation that indirect representation in China through Britain – which was preoccupied with the war in Europe and perceived Asia as a secondary theatre – was no longer adequate. A direct channel for communication with Chiang's government was needed, even if this alienated Tokyo, which instantly slammed the move as 'unfriendly'.³ On 20 October, Sir Frederic W. Eggleston alighted in China's wartime capital Chongqing, where eight days later he presented his official credentials as Australia's first minister to China.⁴

On 7 December 1941 the world woke up to the 'infamy' at Pearl Harbor. After four long years of lone struggle, China's war front became the nexus of a major regional theatre in a global conflict, virtually overnight. Despite the complex and fraught relationships among the Allies that followed, Chiang frequently had praise for the 'gallantry of our Allied forces which are fighting shoulder to shoulder with us' and 'in the struggle of survival of a free world'.⁵ Though focusing his attention squarely on the major powers, Chiang incidentally acknowledged the contribution of 'other United Nations on the road to final victory' such as the Netherlands and Australia, particularly during the short-lived existence of the American–British–Dutch–Australian (ABDA) joint command for Southeast Asia in the initial stage of the Pacific War.⁶ However, the days of allied cooperation in the Pacific, and China's role in it, were quickly forgotten after the war. Lost down the hole created by the Cold War, as historian Rana Mitter wrote in his book *Forgotten Ally*, this extraordinary and multifaceted history has only recently begun to re-emerge, marking the birth of a new genre of historical research.⁷

Local pride: The city of victory

In 1941 the Australian legation established its provisional offices in Chongqing on the south bank of the Yangtze, facing the city proper, in a house close to the Dutch and several other foreign diplomatic missions.⁸ Traditionally the grounds of foreign firms and naval bases in the city, this riverside section was recognised by the Japanese as a safe zone and mostly spared during the frequent carpet-bombing campaigns targeting the densely populated downtown areas on the other side of the river. This special protection ended when the foreign powers finally gave up their neutrality after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and by the end of 1942 Sir Eggleston had relocated the legation to a mansion atop Goose Ridge Hill – the highest hill in the city centre. Two years later, Australia's respected and well-liked senior envoy was transferred to Washington and legation counsellor Keith Officer took temporary charge of the mission – aided by Second Secretary Keith Waller – until Douglas B. Copland took over in early 1946 as Canberra's new minister. The two-story building on Goose Ridge Hill survives and has been designated a municipality-level protected monument. A plaque donated by the Australian embassy in 2006 adorns the compound's main gate today.⁹



Figures 3 and 4. The compound gate and main building of the former Australian legation at Goose Ridge Hill, Chongqing, 2011, source: Vincent Chang.

The process of restoring wartime heritage in China began in the 1980s, when Beijing's shift away from hard-line socialist ideology created space for local society to revisit its pre-Maoist past. In Chongqing, the ensuing 'new remembering' gave rise to the restoration of former embassies and (spurred by exchanges with Taiwanese officials and scholars) major former Nationalist sites such as Chiang Kai-shek's wartime headquarters. The exhibition there today praises Chiang as an important historical figure, while acknowledging the importance to China's war effort of the 'international anti-fascist alliance'.¹⁰ Pictures of foreign diplomats – including Eggleston – posing with Chiang's officials, are displayed in exhibitions across the city.¹¹ There is even a local state museum dedicated to the memory of US General Joseph Stilwell, supreme commander of the South East Asia Allied command, which commemorates China's 'friends from the US and other anti-Fascist allies'. In the museum of the Revolutionary Martyrs – a local 'Red' heritage site once known as the 'Exhibition Hall of Crimes by US Imperialism and Chiang Kai-shek' – there are references to the 'worldwide anti-fascist united front' that defeated Japanese imperial aggression. Foreign consulates domiciled in the sprawling metropolis and in nearby Chengdu have contributed to the revival of this episode of Allied history through commemorative books, articles and films.¹²



Figure 5. Panel of historic photographs exhibited at the Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum, depicting Chongqing as the ‘City of Perseverance,’ 2018, photo: Vincent Chang.

Recent academic research on historical memory and war remembrance in China has shown how the city-province of Chongqing has succeeded in carving out a unique space within the constantly evolving domestic ‘memoryscape’.¹³ Having re-emerged from obscurity during the Mao era, initially as a ‘Red’ revolutionary site, Chongqing has subsequently refashioned itself as the historical centre stage of wartime cooperation between Chiang’s Nationalist government and Mao’s Communist Party, and hence as a rallying site of national unity and strength in the face of foreign aggression. Today, the war exhibition at the Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum – the municipality’s main museum, which welcomes two million visitors annually – depicts Chongqing as the nation’s undefeated ‘City of Perseverance’ and, ultimately, its ‘City of Victory’. This triumphant new reading represents a far cry from the narratives of national humiliation and victimhood often associated with Chinese war memory, and still widely displayed in museums in the regions once occupied by the Japanese (such as Nanjing). Chongqing’s message of heroism, resolve and indomitability aligns neatly with the self-confident, assertive, and more forward-looking central line of war commemoration in Xi Jinping’s China.¹⁴

National narratives: China’s ‘just’ war

Despite this broad alignment of official memory in China between the local and central levels, some subtle differences can be discerned. One such divergence is that official narratives on the central level appear more cautious

in embracing any notion of ‘Allies’. In his 2005 V-J Day anniversary speech, China’s previous paramount leader Hu Jintao generously credited the war’s final victory to the ‘united struggle of all compatriots of the Chinese nation, as well as the solidarity of the Chinese people and their anti-Fascist allies worldwide’. However, a decade later, his successor reverted to a deeply Sino-centric reading, which emphasises the ‘great spirit’ of the Chinese people and merely acknowledges those ‘foreign governments and friends who supported and assisted the Chinese people in resisting aggression’ (my emphasis).¹⁵ The core message that the current Chinese leadership aims to convey is very clear: it is the just cause of China’s war that naturally gained the respect and support from certain (enlightened) quarters abroad.

This message is echoed in the permanent exhibition of the Museum of the War of Chinese People’s Resistance against Japanese Aggression in Beijing – China’s de facto national war memorial – where the main narrative quotes a traditional Chinese idiom, stating that ‘one who upholds justice finds wide support’. It is also incorporated in the chapter on World War II in China’s standardised middle school history textbooks, which have been significantly revised under Xi. While the nature of these textbooks and their greater level of detail makes mentioning the Allies unavoidable, they feature as such in the main storyline only when they suffered military defeat at the hands of the Axis powers (e.g., in the Pacific in early 1942) or when China helped them in resisting the common enemy (e.g., in the Burma campaign).¹⁶ Moreover, only Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union are explicitly named in the text. Much like in the state museums, there is no mention of smaller Pacific allies such as the Netherlands – despite Chongqing’s wartime links with the 1.2 million ethnic Chinese living in the Dutch East Indies under Japanese occupation – or Australia.

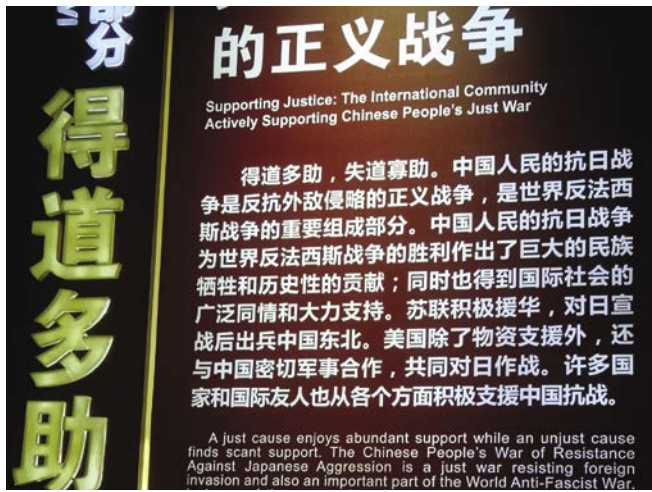


Figure 6. Panel narrating China's 'just war' at the Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance against Japanese Aggression, Beijing, 2018, photo: Vincent Chang.



Figure 7. US Army General Albert C. Wedemeyer confers with Dutch Ambassador Tony Lovink and Australian Chargé d'Affaires Keith Officer (in shorts) at the airport in Chongqing, 1945, source: Estate of J. van den Berg (Dutch diplomat who served as minister-counsellor at the time at the Dutch Embassy to China).

China's war memory today: Avoiding the Allies

Current international scholarship is yet to fully address and explain the virtual absence of the Allies in contemporary official Chinese war memory. However, a tentative examination of this issue points to a complex mixture of three contradictory factors. The first is the long-standing tradition of Sino-centrism and cultural exceptionalism in the Chinese national narrative that continues today in the PRC. The second is the legacy of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist world views, surviving in various guises in contemporary China, that take as their principal concern and unit of analysis transnational class struggle rather than distinctions between sovereign nation-states. The third and final factor is Beijing's contemporary foreign policy principle of non-alignment, which it relies on to maximise its strategic

autonomy, prioritise its own development needs and proclaim its peaceful intent. These factors highlight two core characteristics of historical memory in today's China that are the subject of cutting-edge interdisciplinary research: the salience of present-day identities, ideas and intentions in shaping public memory, and, more distinctively, the remarkable role and innovative apparatus of the Chinese party-state as a memory monopolist. ♦

¹ Council of International Affairs Chungking, *The Chinese Year Book 1943* (Bombay: Thacker, 1943), 273–4.

² 'Minister to China', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 May 1941, 12.

³ 'Australia to Name a Minister to China', *The New York Times*, 14 May 1941, 11.

⁴ V.K.L. Chang and Zhou Yong, *Toward Equality: Chongqing's Wartime International Circles and the Dawn of Modern Diplomacy in China* (Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House, 2017), 389.

⁵ C. Kai-shek, *All We Are and All We Have: Speeches and Messages Since Pearl Harbor* (New York: John Day, 1943), 11, 33. For similar official rhetoric, see *The Chinese Year Book 1943*, 127.

⁶ C. Kai-shek (transl. Wang Chung-Hui), *China's Destiny* (New York: MacMillan, 1947), 140; Chiang, *All We Are*, 33.

⁷ R. Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937–1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2013). The book also appeared as *China's War with Japan, 1937–1945: The Struggle for Survival* (London: Allen Lane, 2013); for the quotation, see 10. For recent scholarly work on China's relations with nonmajor allies, see this author's various publications on wartime Sino-Dutch relations.

⁸ Chang and Zhou, *Toward Equality*, 389.

⁹ For details, see J. Wang, 'Eling Park', <https://www.ichongqing.info/attraction/eling-park> (accessed 7 February 2023); 'Blog: An Australian Legacy in Chongqing', 1 September 2017, <https://chengdu.china.embassy.gov.au/cxdu/australialegacyblog.html> (accessed 7 February 2023).

¹⁰ V.K.L. Chang, 'Exemplifying National Unity and Victory in Local State Museums: Chongqing and the New Paradigm of World War II Memory in China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 138 (2022), 987.

¹¹ See, e.g., the permanent exhibition on the city's wartime history ('The Resistance Years') at the Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum.

¹² See, e.g., V.K.L. Chang, *Dutch Traces, Places, and Faces in Chongqing, 1938–1946* (Beijing: Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in China, 2013); 'Holland and Chongqing: A Common Past, Present and Future', documentary sponsored by the Royal Dutch Consulate General in Chongqing (Chongqing Television, 30 October 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vKDX1vfdjc> (accessed 7 February 2023); K. Bagnall, *The Chungking Legation: Australia's Diplomatic Mission in Wartime China* (Melbourne: Museum of Chinese Australian History, 2015); K. Bagnall and S. Couchman, 'The Chungking Legation: Australia's First Diplomatic Mission to China, 80 Years Ago', *The Conversation*, 28 October 2021, <https://theconversation.com/the-chungking-legation-australias-first-diplomatic-mission-to-china-80-years-ago-169637> (accessed 7 February 2023).

¹³ See, e.g., K. Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 214–42; Z. Yong, V.K.L. Chang and G. Xiaohui, 'Recalling the War in China: The Dahoufang Project in Chongqing and the Restoration of a Legacy', *Frontiers of History in China* 9, no. 4 (2014), 611–27; Chang, 'Exemplifying National Unity'.

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