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Dictating the Past

What A 'Correct' View of History Teaches Us

Dr Vincent K.L. Chang

The burdensome past?

It is often claimed that knowledge of Chinese history is essential for an understanding of Chinese policy thinking. The basic reasoning is this: the past informs the present, and by shaping present-day worldviews, values and identities, the nation's historical experience delineates policy space and thereby conditions political outcomes. In China's case, it is the traumatic 20th-century experience of national victimisation and suffering at the hands of foreign imperialists, and the end of Chinese celestial greatness this heralded, that is said to weigh on contemporary politics and explain why Beijing is so sensitive to any hints of foreign interference in its domestic affairs and is bent on restoring its former greatness. Yet the reality might not be so straightforward. Why should we assume that the past continues to burden the present, in China or elsewhere? As a scholar of the history and international relations of modern China, I am not about to question the importance of historical study. Yet this does not entail accepting that the past dictates the present, and it is not immediately clear what would mark China as an exception.

A Chongqing quest

My quest through China's modern history began in 2008 when I went searching for traces of family history in Chongqing, a provincial-level municipality of 32 million people in south-west China. This mountainous inland city served as China's provisional national capital during the Second World War while Japanese occupation forces and Chinese collaborationist groups controlled the country's coastal regions. As the temporary seat of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government from 1938 to 1946, Chongqing became the main stage of the tenuous wartime alliance between Chiang's ruling Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT)

and the rival Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of Mao Zedong. When the Allies established their regional command in Chongqing following the outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941, the city gained global fame as the East Asian bulwark of resistance against fascism and one of the four great wartime capitals alongside London, Moscow and Washington. After the war, as hostilities between the KMT and the CCP resumed, Chongqing became the site of failed peace talks and political executions.

During a visit to the Chongqing Municipal Archives in 2010, I stumbled upon the records of a training programme held in the summer of 1942 for government and KMT officials, which my great-uncle had attended.²⁵ The flyleaves of the programme booklet contained solemn portraits of the founder of the Chinese Republic and ‘Father of the Nation’ (國父), Sun Yat-sen, and of Generalissimo Chiang. Interestingly, the image of Sun Yat-sen, who is revered in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as the ‘Forerunner of the Great Revolution’ (伟大的革命先行者), was perfectly intact, whereas Chiang’s portrait had been disfigured and provisionally repaired afterwards: first defaced with a giant cross and illegible hand-written characters, it had subsequently been wrinkled and torn into pieces, and finally glued back together with white painters’ tape. This image has since been imprinted in my mind as epitomising the volatile nature of official memory in the PRC of the Chinese Nationalists: initial preservation, followed by deformation and attempted elimination, and then by partial restoration; with each transformation occurring in response to political imperatives.

As the former stronghold of Chiang’s ‘bandit regime’, Chongqing suffered a similar fate. Demoted to a provincial-level city and turned into a restricted military–industrial zone after the war, the city initially entered a period of obscurity. In the 1960s, Chongqing gradually re-emerged in the public ‘memoryscape’, although not as a monument of the Second World War—let alone of wartime KMT–CCP cooperation—but as a major ‘Red’ site glorifying the

25 Chongqing Municipal Archives, Central Training Corps files 0092-2-27 (中央训练团党政训练班第二十七期职员通讯录); 0093-2-13 (中训团党政班职教学员总名册); and 0093-3-23 (外交部使领人员研究班第一期训练实纪).

Chinese people's revolutionary struggle under the CCP's leadership.²⁶ This began with the construction of a martyrs' cemetery and an Exhibition Hall on Crimes by US Imperialism and Chiang Kai-shek, memorialising the political executions of the 1940s. Official government and party records abandoned by Chiang's fleeing Nationalists in late 1949, meanwhile, were stored by PRC archivists in folders imprinted in red characters with the directive 'Never Forget Class Struggle!' (千万不要忘记阶级斗争). During a visit to the archive in 2008, I found my grandfather's records in one of those 'enemy and puppet political files' (敌伪政治档案案卷) of the 'bandit Kuomintang' (匪国民党).²⁷ Branded as enemies of the people, KMT veterans and their families for years suffered political stigmatisation and social discrimination.²⁸

This changed in the 1980s, when Maoist socialism was substituted by nationalism as the de facto legitimising political ideology. This new direction taken at the central level opened up space at the grassroots level for war victims and veterans—including surviving KMT veterans—to revisit and release their long-suppressed traumas, and gradually prompted a makeover of Chongqing's urban identity. It set in motion a large-scale restoration of public memory of the brutal aerial bombings that the Japanese armed forces unleashed on the city between 1938 and 1943, which had been forcibly erased from public memory during the Mao years.²⁹ An annual remembrance day was established in 1987 and work began on restoring air-raid shelters across the city and turning them into public spaces, a process that continues to this day.³⁰ Existing Red sites such

26 Vincent 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), pp. 977–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2031004>. See also Rana Mitter, *China's Good War: How World War II is Shaping a New Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap 2020).

27 Chongqing Municipal Archives, KMT Chongqing Party Headquarters files 0051-2-163 (国民党重庆市党部).

28 Jacqueline Zhenru Lin, 'Remembering Forgotten Heroes and the Idealisation of True Love: Veteran Memorial Activism in Contemporary China', *Memory Studies* 14, no. 5 (2021), pp. 1081–1105, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980211017952>.

29 Yong Zhou, Vincent K.L. Chang and Xiaohui Gong, '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), pp. 611–27, <https://doi.org/10.3868/s020-003-014-0040-0>.

30 See, for example, Tan Yingzi and Deng Rui, 'Chongqing War-Era Bomb Shelter Gets a New Lease on Life', *China Daily*, 4 November 2022, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202211/04/WS63645433a310fd2b29e8036a.html>.

as the above-mentioned Exhibition Hall were renamed and revamped, while new exhibitions were opened in the restored residences of former KMT officials, including the wartime headquarters and residences of Chiang Kai-shek, his closest confidants and even a US general.³¹

The past two decades have seen Chongqing reinvent itself as a historic rallying point of national unity, greatness and victory for the Chinese people. Its reinvention exemplifies the more self-confident and triumphant rhetorical line of Second World War commemoration that has emerged at the central level under China's President Xi Jinping. The war exhibition in the municipality's main museum—a massive edifice at the former site of the KMT government that attracts two million visitors annually—today portrays Chongqing as the country's 'City of Victory', a place where the KMT and CCP joined hands to resist external aggression and a united nation showed its resolve to achieve final victory. At the martyrs' cemetery mentioned above, patriotic KMT generals are now commemorated alongside CCP heroes. In Chiang's former command centre and mountaintop villa, the one-time arch-enemy of the Chinese people has been enshrined as an important historical figure 'worth knowing and studying'.³² Meanwhile, Chiang's rehabilitation on the mainland coincided with efforts by the Democratic Progressive Party administration in Taiwan to remove his image from public spaces.³³

Foes and friends: emergence of a 'memory alliance'

The past thus continues to serve rather than constrain present-day political agendas on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, even if in diametrically different ways than before. This is just one of many examples of how China's momentous past, rather than forming a static legacy that dictates present-day policies, is actively utilised by political actors as a malleable tool serving their agendas.

31 See, for example, 'More People Visit World War II Allied Forces Headquarters in China, *China Daily*, 6 July 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-07/06/content_30018281.htm; and Chang, 'Exemplifying National Unity and Victory in Local State Museums', pp. 986–89.

32 Chang, 'Exemplifying National Unity and Victory in Local State Museums', p. 987.

33 See, for example, Chen Yu-fu and Kayleigh Madjar, 'Removal of Chiang Statue Prioritized', *Taipei Times*, 9 September 2021, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2021/09/09/2003764058>.

As I have analysed elsewhere, the recent resurgence of Second World War II memory in the PRC serves multiple political goals, targeting various audiences.³⁴ To 'the Chinese people' at home and overseas, the forward-looking, more inclusive new narrative imparts that only under the inspiring leadership of the CCP can the Chinese nation demonstrate the unity, patriotism and greatness that are necessary for rejuvenation and revival. To the rest of the world, particularly the West, the narrative signals that China, as a former ally and co-founder of the present world order, stood on the 'right side' of history then and has no interest today in unmaking the order it helped to build, provided its legitimate interests as a resurging global power are respected.

Seen from Beijing, the principal threats to both national rejuvenation and the current international system are the hegemonic and unilateralist practices of the United States. When current strongman leader Xi Jinping proclaims that 'no force can ever undermine China's status or stop the Chinese people and nation from marching forward' and that any 'foreign force' attempting to do so would run into a 'great wall of steel' forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people, there is no doubt that the US is at the front of his mind. Put differently, Washington's containment of China and its 'undemocratic' international conduct constitute today's principal threat that the united, great and inevitably victorious Chinese people must resist with the same indomitable spirit that delivered it final victory in the Second World War.³⁵ As the United States has dethroned Japan as the primary discursive 'Other' threatening national rejuvenation, Tokyo has switched roles to become Washington's key regional 'vassal', assisting the US in containing China and provoking it on Taiwan and other strategic issues.³⁶

In a similar vein, Russia has emerged in official Chinese discourse as China's 'friendly Other' on account of shared strategic goals. Whereas Mao Zedong once made a public show of his contempt for Stalin's successor Khrushchev,

34 Vincent K.L. Chang, 'Recalling Victory, Recounting Greatness: Second World War Remembrance in Xi Jinping's China', *China Quarterly* 248, no. 1 (2022), pp. 1152–73, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741021000497>.

35 Vincent K.L. Chang, 'China's New Historical Statecraft: Reviving the Second World War for National Rejuvenation', *International Affairs* 98, no. 3 (2022), pp. 1053–69, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaac021>.

36 See, for example, 'Japanese Politicians' Worship of Yasukuni Shrine Angers Neighboring Countries; Reflects Tokyo's Right-Leaning Tendency, More Twisted Historical View', *Global Times*, 16 August 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202208/1273060.shtml>.

Xi Jinping used his first two terms to hail Russia's President Vladimir Putin as his 'best friend'. On his first visit to Moscow as China's president in 2013, Xi vowed that China and Russia would 'forever be good neighbours, good friends and good partners', while emphasising the importance of 'cementing the friendship between the two peoples'.³⁷ Glossing over the numerous conflicts and enduring grievances in the fraught history of this bilateral relationship, Xi related a story of a Russian air-force pilot who perished in China during the Second World War and whom he claimed the Chinese people would 'never forget', even though generations of Chinese citizens have grown up under state patriotism campaigns inculcating vivid 'memories' of Russia's imperialist intrusions in China.

The year 2015 displayed the clearest manifestation thus far of what I call the emerging Sino-Russian 'memory alliance'.³⁸ In May 2015, Xi Jinping visited Moscow to join Putin for Russia's Victory Day celebrations and to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Four months later, to mark the 70th anniversary of Victory over Japan (VJ) Day, his 'best friend' reciprocated by joining the Chinese leader at the rostrum of Beijing's Heavenly Gate to watch over a contingent of Russian guards of honour marching in a national military parade of unprecedented scale.³⁹ Building on this rediscovered shared past, the Chinese and Russian ambassadors to Washington DC in September 2020 jointly called for the United States to honour the history of the Second World War and the 'spirit' of fairness and justice fostered in that war and to move away from Cold War-like 'zero-sum' thinking.⁴⁰ In contrast, Xi frequently praises the Sino-

37 Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), p. 303.

38 Vincent K.L. Chang, 'Shifting World War II Memory in East Asia Signals Newly Emerging Global Alliances', *The Diplomat*, 2 September 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/shifting-world-war-ii-memory-in-east-asia-signals-newly-emerging-global-alliances>.

39 'Xi Attends Russia's V-Day Parade, Marking Shared Victory with Putin', *China Daily*, 9 May 2015, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015xiattendwwii/2015-05/09/content_20670224.htm; and Andrea Chen, 'Putin the Great: Russian Leader Shows His 'Emperor' Form at Beijing's Grand Military Parade', 3 September 2015, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1855036/putin-great-russian-leader-shows-his-emperor-form>.

40 Anatoly Antonov and Cui Tiankai, 'Honor World War II with a Better, Shared Future', *Defense One*, 2 September 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/09/honor-world-war-ii-better-shared-future/168191>.

Russian partnership as a 'new type' of international relations promoting 'true multilateralism and international fairness and justice'.⁴¹

Most recently, following the China–US trade war, the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, Beijing's official remembrance appears to have shifted from past conflict to present-day peace-building efforts. The commemoration in 2020 of the 75th anniversary of victory in the Second World War was much less spectacular than the 70th anniversary extravaganza, and 2022's events were even more subdued. Instead, Martyrs' Day took centre stage that year, allowing Beijing to dissociate its patriotic statecraft from Putin's aggression in Europe. On 30 September 2022, Xi Jinping led senior CCP leaders to pay tribute at the Monument to the People's Heroes in Tiananmen Square to those martyrs who devoted their lives to the 'liberation' of the Chinese people, telling them that a nation needs heroes and martyrs also in times of peace, as they are 'the coordinates that guide the nation'. The commentary provided by the state-run news channel praised those modern-day heroes 'from all walks of life' in 'peace-time China' who had sacrificed their lives in serving the pressing needs of the people and helping maintain stability and peace.⁴²

Always correct: the memory monopolist

Yet if the past is a resource that can be strategically mined and deployed to unify and mobilise the nation, it is equally a potential threat if used by others for the wrong purposes. In one of his first closed-door speeches as China's paramount leader, Xi revealed this concern by quoting a Chinese adage: 'the first way to destroy a nation is to destroy its history' (灭人之国，必先去其史).⁴³

Since his ascension to power, Xi has repeatedly warned against the dangers of 'historical nihilism' (历史虚无主义)—a euphemism for any derogation of state-endorsed myths glorifying the Party, country or military—which he has identified as the primary cause of the Soviet Union's collapse and the biggest threat

41 See, for example, 'Xi Jinping Holds a Video Meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin', 28 June 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/kjgzbdffyq/202106/t20210629_9171091.html.

42 See CGTN's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4YwZkmHIJ4>.

43 '习近平：历史不可虚无' [History cannot be empty], *China Daily*, 20 October 2016, https://china.chinadaily.com.cn/2016-10/20/content_27123201.htm.

presently facing the CCP.⁴⁴ Mirroring similar trends in Russia, Beijing has recently promulgated various formal laws aimed at criminalising ‘historical nihilism’ and codifying a ‘correct’ view of history reflecting its own selective reading of the past. These so-called memory laws have so far been invoked to rectify ‘false rumours’ concerning historical figures and events, arrest historians for questioning history textbooks and to delete millions of ‘historically nihilist’ social media posts.⁴⁵

The image that these examples evoke is that of a resourceful and creative yet coercive memory monopolist. Resourceful and creative, because historical memory in China presents itself not as a static encumbrance but as a dynamic variable that is constantly sanitised and mobilised according to prevailing political imperatives. Coercive and monopolistic, because the party-state dictates, guards and enforces what parts of history the Chinese people encounter and can ‘remember’. But the gravity of presentist impulses in commemorating the past is by no means unique to the Chinese context. One needs only to look at the recurring debates surrounding, for example, the commemoration of war, colonialism and slavery across Europe to see how contemporary concerns about apologies and reparations, veteran and victim identities, and discrimination and inclusiveness are constantly stretching and redefining the parameters of public history. Many such examples at home and nearby underline that present-day political agendas, preferences and concerns drive public remembrance and affect historical interpretations as much as the reverse.

There is one crucial difference marking the Chinese case, however, and that is the role of the state. The dominance of the Chinese party-state as producer, modifier and mobiliser of selective readings of the past to serve its own ends sets the Chinese ‘memoryscape’ apart from those elsewhere, and particularly in the West. Whereas in liberal democratic societies a range of societal actors utilise remembrance for their own sake to affirm and articulate their identities, seeking

44 ‘举报网上历史虚无主义错误言论请到‘12377’——举报中心‘涉历史虚无主义有害信息举报专区’上线’ [To report erroneous historical nihilism on the internet, please go to 12377—‘Historical nihilism harmful information reporting area’ report centre now online], Reporting Centre of the Cyberspace Administration of China, 9 April 2021, https://www.12377.cn/wxxx/2021/fc6eb910_web.html.

45 Jun Mai, ‘China Deletes 2 Million Online Posts for ‘Historical Nihilism’ as Communist Party Centenary Nears’, *South China Morning Post*, 11 May 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3132957/china-deletes-2-million-online-posts-historical-nihilism>.

a place in the sun in a multicultural and inclusive society, in China it is exclusively the party-state that seeks recognition. Local or popular narratives can be tolerated or even stimulated, such as in the case of Chongqing, but ultimately are controlled by the party-state in its ongoing struggle for self-legitimation and for securing a place in a multipolar world that it hopes will recognise its past and present achievements. In my view, studying Chinese history and historiography thus serves not only the goal of understanding specific episodes of the past and their enduring impacts, but also that of illuminating how present-day actors express their evolving world images, self-images and basic values through highly selective and malleable historical narratives.

Democratising history

If history offers any lessons, it should perhaps be that there is no such thing as a single, objectively 'correct' history. The causes and consequences of the Second World War and other key historical events are and will continue to be hotly debated among historians. An example relevant also in the Chinese context is the debate over whether the dropping of atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was necessary or even decisive in bringing Imperial Japan to its knees. The conventional wisdom in the West that this was indeed the case partially reflects the persistent legacy of dominant US-favoured and Western-centric discourses of the time. These are susceptible to charges of victor's justice and in fact increasingly contested by leading Asian and Western historians alike, who cite other critical factors for Tokyo's capitulation.⁴⁶ Similar questions can be raised, for example, about the 'decisiveness' of D-Day in Europe or the causes of the war. I do not intend to delve into these debates here, but simply underscore that the way 'history' is told varies across places and over time, and that writing and rewriting history takes places everywhere and always.

I therefore see history as an amalgamation of constantly evolving and competing stories about the past, narrated and tailored for consumption by specific contemporary audiences. Each of these stories will inevitably be incomplete, fragmented and hence selective and 'subjective', based on the conscious and unconscious choices that reflect the narrator's values, preferences and

46 For a recent example, see Richard Overy, *Blood and Ruins: The Great Imperial War, 1931–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), p. 370.

goals. While this view is hardly remarkable, it has policy implications that are often overlooked. One such implication is that major historical debates do not lend themselves to being settled in political resolutions or reduced to true-or-false fact-checking exercises by administrators of online portals combating ‘disinformation’. Yet this is exactly what EU institutions have attempted in response to Russia’s historical revisionism, for example, through the European Parliament’s 2019 resolution on the causes of the Second World War and through disinformation ‘disproof’ entries on the EUvsDisinfo portal, the flagship project of the European External Action Service’s East StratCom Task Force.⁴⁷

Attempting to prescribe a ‘correct’ history is dictatorial, deceptive and arguably self-defeating. One would expect European institutions to avoid mirroring the Russian and Chinese examples and falling into the trap of engaging in memory monopoly or memory wars, which are not only devoid of intellectual merit but also politically counter-productive, as they fan the flames of nationalism, set in motion escalatory dynamics and ultimately may help to legitimise the regimes in Moscow and Beijing to their home audiences. Rather than contesting self-serving historiographical diktats by promulgating alternative ones, a more effective response to the opportunistic or aggressive historical statecraft employed by Beijing or Moscow would be to emphasise the coercive and monopolistic practices that these governments adopt to produce ‘correct history’ and to shine a spotlight on those historical episodes that they choose to ignore—just as they assert that ‘history should never be forgotten’. Debating history can then be left to historians and the wider public.

47 See European Parliament resolution of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe (2019/2819(RSP)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021_EN.html; and, for example, ‘Disinfo: Nazi–Soviet Pact was Not the Cause of WWII’, EUvsDisinfo, 8 February 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nazi-soviet-pact-was-not-the-cause-of-wwii..>