

A slow remembering: China's memory of the war against Japan

Sparked by accusations that the Japanese Ministry of Education had authorized textbooks that whitewash atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers during the war, China's public was allowed to vent its rage in April 2005. The Japanese consulate in Shanghai was attacked with stones and bottles, while the authorities warned foreigners of all nationalities to stay away from the demonstrations. Sixty years after the end of the Sino-Japanese war, the history of that period is becoming more, not less prominent in the contemporary politics of both societies.

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At the start of the twenty-first century, Japan would like to be seen as a nation-state looking to the future. Even in recession, it remains an economic superpower, its popular culture (whether in the shape of *anime*, Hello Kitty or Beat Takeshi) globally significant. In many ways the country's recent attempt to seek a permanent seat on the UN Security Council reflects a justified belief that Japan has earned a place at the top table. Yet, the continuing divide in the way Japan sees its postwar identity (primarily as victim), and the way other Asian nations see Japan (largely as an aggressor), shows no sign of fading. The Chinese decision to bring its war against Japan back to the centre of its nationalism is not a temporary phenomenon, and reflects a determination to force Japan to define its present in terms of its past.

The disappearing war

In one sense, China's new awareness of its anti-Japanese conflict is part of a process by which its attitude toward its own history is becoming more normal. For all other major powers involved in the Second World War, victorious or defeated, engagement with their war experience was a crucial part of creating postwar identity, whether it was Britain coming to terms with the loss of its

ists were corrupt fools who cared only for themselves and little for China; the collaborators were worse, traitors beyond redemption. While the Japanese themselves were not forgotten, and the Cultural Revolution in particular gave rise to writings and cartoons that portrayed them in savage caricature, much of the Chinese historical discussion of the war seemed to regard the enemies within as more important than the dangerous neighbours who had come across the sea of Japan.

A new war history

The 1980s marked a turning point in the Chinese treatment of the war. A combination of factors led to a change in the way both academic and public historians dealt with the conflict. In the early Cold War period, one of the motivations for the People's Republic to soft-pedal the Japanese war record was a desire to detach Japan from the Cold War embrace of the US, and achieve diplomatic recognition. With the opening of full relations between China and Japan in 1972, this was no longer an issue. Then, the deaths of implacable enemies Mao and Chiang stimulated the reformist Chinese government to find ways to woo Taiwan into reunification. Finally, the CCP's domestic legitimacy came under serious pressure in the reform era as old Maoist economic certainties were abandoned.

tions, and civic associations can be seen as part of 'civil society' when their agendas remain constrained by state and party. Nevertheless, the state has been unable wholly to control the consequences of its decision to allow public expression of anger against the war. Opinion polls have shown that the younger generation is, if anything, more inclined to harbour hostile feelings against Japan due to the war, while events exacerbating the wounds flare up regularly. In 2003, a public outcry was engineered because of an 'orgy' held by Japanese businessmen in Zhuhai on 18 September, supposedly a deliberate insult to the anniversary of September 18, 1931, the date of the invasion of Manchuria. In 2004, there was public condemnation of Japanese chemical and bacteriological warfare in the Northeast, sparked by the discovery of long-hidden bombs from the war years. And, spring 2005 saw permission granted for demonstrations against any Japanese attempt to gain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. But it seems unlikely that the government was enthusiastic about the sheer violence of the demonstrators in Beijing, who brought bottles and stones to shower the embassy, or by the repeat

performance with the Japanese consulate in Shanghai.

Prospects

It is clear that sixty years after the end of World War II, positions in China and Japan over the meaning of the war have hardened. While there are entrenched positions on both sides, the space for public discussion of the wartime experience remains more multifaceted in Japan. There, polemicists of the far right take ludicrous negationist positions, arguing that atrocities such as the Nanjing massacre never took place, or else were wildly exaggerated. A quick glance at, for instance, diaries and letters from third-country missionaries suggests that this is historically untenable. Then again, a significant proportion of the mainstream of Japanese historians as well as public discussion acknowledges Japanese wartime guilt, and regards it as a reason why the country should not seek full rearmament. Indeed, it was leftwing Japanese journalists who were instrumental in drawing attention to the Nanjing massacre in the early 1970s when the subject was hardly discussed in China itself.

In China, there has been a genuine and undeniable opening up of discussion about the war years. Yet much of it is still tied to an explicitly political, rather than historical agenda: the signs outside the museums in Nanjing and Beijing proclaim proudly and honestly that they are 'sites for the encouragement of patriotic education.' This approach has meant that the changes in history still, sixty years on, look monolithic rather than nuanced; for instance, Chiang Kaishek's record of patriotism has been reassessed more positively (just as he has fallen from favour in Taiwan), but collaboration still remains a difficult subject to broach. The contrast with Taiwan is evident, where democratization and liberalization have led to much more complex and ambivalent responses to the period of Japanese rule. As long as the CCP remains unwilling to allow similarly nuanced discussions of China's own war experience, it will continue to provide fuel for the most unsavoury elements of the right in Japan. ◀

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empire, France and Germany seeking a new type of European union, or Japan turning from strong-armed empire to demilitarized economic powerhouse. Of all the major powers, only China failed as a society to engage with the meaning of its anti-Japanese conflict. This was in large part due to the way China moved from world war to Cold War. The Nationalists and Communists were at war by 1946, while the eventual victory of the Communists in 1949 meant that a balanced consideration of the earlier war was impossible, even though it had ended less than four years previously. Through most of the Cold War, the aspects of the War of Resistance to Japan discussed and féted in China mostly related to the experience of the Communist base areas, in particular the Shaan-GanNing base with its capital at Yan'an.

This concentration meant other issues were absent from discussion: there was little engaged analysis of the role of the Nationalist government, Chinese collaboration in occupied areas, or activities in Communist base areas outside the Mao-dominated Northwest. Where the first two were discussed, it was generally in the monochrome terms of a classic Confucian history: the National-

New sources of legitimacy were needed, and among the sources of that legitimacy was the restoration of official interest in the war against Japan. Officially-endorsed versions of the new historiography appeared in many media: films, books, and perhaps most concretely (in all senses of the term), three massive museums in Nanjing, Beijing, and Shenyang, respectively on the sites of the Nanjing Massacre, the Marco Polo Bridge incident that marked the outbreak of all-out war, and the invasion of Manchuria in 1931. There was also a marked growth in scholarly interest in the period, the most notable example being the journal *KangRi zhanzheng yanjiu* (Research on the War of Resistance to Japan), published since 1991 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which deals with topics on the period that could only have been dreamed of a decade or two earlier.

Public responses

The war also provides some of the more worrying phenomena which stem from the new space for discussion and argument in Chinese society. One of the most contentious discussions in the field of contemporary Chinese politics is the extent to which the media, demonstra-