

WWII memory must unite Chinese people, deepen China-Russia bond

By Vincent K. L. Chang

Recent years have seen a surge in official remembrance of World War II in China. This shift became evident during the unprecedented [commemoration extravaganza](#) in Beijing in September 2015, when Xi Jinping oversaw a massive military parade and entertained world leaders atop the Tiananmen rostrum to mark the 70th anniversary of the victory over Japan.

Underscoring the war's renewed importance, China's State Council in 2014 established two new official remembrance days. Shortly thereafter, the official periodization of the 'Chinese People's War of Resistance' was extended from 8 to 14 years, with state media [replicating](#) Xi's claim that of all conflicts in World War II the Chinese people's struggle for justice 'started first', 'lasted longest' and saw 'the highest number of casualties'.

Misperceptions and advances

The sudden revival of World War II in China caught the attention of Western analysts, many of whom [lambasted](#) Beijing's supposedly distortive take on history. But while historical memory has developed into a burgeoning field of enquiry by China experts, historians and international relations scholars, it is a field that is marred by prejudice and misperceptions pertaining to both the history of China's war experience and its evolving place in the contemporary memoriescape.

In a number of recent articles I have attempted to dispel some of these misconceptions by arguing, amongst other points, that (1) the recent wave of official war memory has been marked by a [discursive shift](#) away from the earlier victimization narrative towards a new triumphalist retelling of the war's history; that (2) that despite variations on [the local level](#), there is no real space for 'alternative memory' deviating from the dominant central narrative; and – most recently – that (3) while Beijing's retelling of the war can nonetheless to have 'normalized' compared to earlier eras, it is increasingly being [weaponized](#) for domestic and international political ends.

Mobilizing memory

Some of these new findings may come as a surprise to analysts who presume that the Chinese state is promoting deliberate falsehoods about World War II and the Communist Party's role in that conflict. But a close look [reveals](#) that Beijing's desire for national unity and international recognition

has, paradoxically, led it to adopt a more inclusive, nuanced, and historically accurate narrative of World War II than ever before.

Granted, significant gaps remain in Beijing's stylized reading, but this type of selectivity is not uncommon. What is uncommon, however, is the way the party-state monopolizes and mobilizes the historical narrative in both its domestic and international discourses.

National unity

The foremost aim of Beijing's new historical statecraft is to shore up its legitimacy and enforce national unity among the people at what it sees as a critical juncture in its nation-building project. As the Chinese people are nearing the end goal of national 'rejuvenation' after more than a century of [aspirational struggle](#), tensions with the West are expected to rise. Only if the Chinese people are united, the CCP reckons, will it be possible to secure 'decisive victory' in realizing the 'Chinese dream' of rejuvenation.

With this goal in mind, Xi has embarked on a reeducation campaign. The unmistakeable lesson of World War II pushed in the [recently reprinted Chinese history textbooks and revised museum exhibitions](#) is that the Chinese people owe their final victory in the war and their 'greatness' to their moral spirit, national unity, perseverance, and unfailing patriotic loyalty.

Old and new traitors

On one level, the new remembering has brought about a rehabilitation of the Chinese Nationalists. Once branded as a morally corrupted and inept lot who betrayed China's revolution, they have gradually been welcomed back into the fold, with local museums in China's former wartime capital Chongqing now showcasing Chiang Kai-shek – Mao's onetime archenemy – as '[a figure worth knowing, understanding, and studying](#)'.

On another level, as Beijing worries about 'external forces' endangering China's national rejuvenation, Chinese people who are seen as abetting these forces are branded as 'traitors'. The mounting use of war metaphors in public discourse during the past few years and the increasingly charged atmosphere this has created have already led to the [cancellation](#) of celebrities at home and the [degradation](#) of Chinese-born officials working in the US state department.

Beijing's new 'memory diplomacy'

Several recent examples show that China's 'memory diplomacy' has begun to take on a global character, aimed no longer at exacting apologies from Japan, but at stopping the world at large from interfering with the development path '[chosen by the Chinese people](#)'. This includes external interference with what it perceives as its rightful claims to Taiwan and disputed sections of the East and South China Seas.

Increasingly, Beijing has teamed up with Moscow to oppose what both states portray as ‘distortion’ of World War II history by the West. There is a growing list of examples of this, both in China’s bilateral dealings with Moscow – most recently during the private [Xi-Putin talks](#) at the Beijing 2022 Olympics – as well as multilaterally at recent meetings of the [UN Security Council](#), the [Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#), and the [BRICS](#).

Deepening China-Russia ties

The two partners dispatched national guards of honor delegations to march in each other’s military parades commemorating World War II in [2015](#) and [2020](#). In September 2020, marking the 75th anniversary of V-J Day, the Chinese and Russian ambassadors in the US published a [joint article](#) in which they urged Washington to honour the history and spirit of the war and move away from Cold War-like ‘zero-sum’ thinking.

It is often said that the Sino-Russian partnership is merely a marriage of convenience that suffers from [mutual distrust, power disparity and conflicting interests](#). While there are clear elements of truth to this, the more noteworthy yet often overlooked dynamic is that both sides have been working hard to reverse their trust deficit through the promotion of common historical narratives. That these efforts may be having some effect is illustrated by the levels of [support among Chinese bloggers](#) for Russia in its present conflict with Ukraine and the West, whereas until not so long ago Chinese nationalists were less shy in venting their historical grievances towards their northernly neighbour.

A new era?

No other episodes of China’s recent history fits Beijing’s current goals better than the memory of the World War II and the united front that allowed the Chinese people to claim their just and inevitable victory in this conflict. As Xi Jinping is hailing a ‘[new era](#)’ of international relations, this increasingly central plank of China’s historical statecraft deserves more attention.

Click [here](#) to read the author’s most recent related publication in *International Affairs*: “China’s new historical statecraft: reviving the Second World War for national rejuvenation”