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Cacophonous Memories of the War

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The consensus among scholars of modern Chinese history is that “the single most devastating event” (Mitter and Moore 2011: 227) in this period is the Chinese War of Resistance against Japan (1931–1945) (hereafter the War). During this prolonged aggression that lasted for fourteen years, the entire nation was brought down to ruins under massive-scale destruction and violence, in which approximately half of the territory and population were subjected to the cruel oppression of the Japanese invading army. Thousands of towns and villages were decimated and reduced to ashes as a consequence. In addition, more than 15 million Chinese lost their lives, approximately 60 to 95 million became refugees, and other unknown millions were known to have been bereaved, injured, captured and coerced into forced labor or sexual slavery (Department of History of Peking University 1995; Military Science Academy 1995; Li 1995; Zhang 2001). The heinous nature of the war atrocities committed by the invading army (Chang 1997; Chen 2005; Gao et al. 2005; Li et al. 1995; Shi 2005; Wu 2005; Xie 2005; Yin & Young 1996) left indelible scars of trauma and anguish on the bodies and consciousness of millions of Chinese.1

Ironically, for decades after the end of the War, the suffering and agony of the people remained ultimately private, while official memories of the War were forcefully couched in a victorious and heroic discourse, itself thoroughly elided into a communist narrative focusing exclusively on class struggle. It was only in the last two decades that some signs of change began to appear in the public domain, and the War memories began to take a different shape from those of the previous period.2

What has happened to the War memories in contemporary Chinese society? How has the War been told and depicted in the official narrative since the beginning of People’s Republic of China six decades ago? Had there indeed been significant changes, what was changed, and how significant was the difference? These seemingly banal questions are not to be trifled with, for social scientists and historians have long demonstrated that collective memory, especially that of disastrous events such as wars, plays a crucial role in the construction of national collective identities and thereby not only composes a central part in the legitimization package adopted by state leaders but also exerts significant impact on the geopolitics and interstate relations of specific...
Cacophonous memories

regions (Megill 1998; Volkan 1997; Zerubavel 1995). Tracing the path of official war memories in contemporary China, therefore, is of ultimate significance, not only because it can clearly reveal the series of legitimacy-building projects conducted by the Chinese Communist Party (the CCP) ever since it came to power in 1949, but more importantly, because it may offer one important piece of the jigsaw puzzle which, when completed, can point toward possible solutions to many difficult conundrums that continue to bedevil the geopolitics of East Asia and obstruct the global community from knowing a truer version of history regarding what really happened during the War in China. These puzzles include but are not limited to the following: Why is it that the enormous sufferings inflicted on China during WWII remain relatively obscure while the Holocaust and Hiroshima memories have become “universalized symbol of human sufferings and moral evil of the 21st century” (Alexander et al. 2004: 197)? why is it that China’s experiences such as the Nanking Massacre remain relatively unknown and have yet to reach the ear and eye of the world (Alexander & Gao 2012[2007]; Chang 1997; Li 2000; Yin & Young 1996)?; why is it that Japan’s most powerful public figures and political leaders routinely and successfully deny the facts of war atrocities perpetrated by Japanese military which have been validated by a variety of evidence (He 2011; Lawson & Tanaka 2010; Reilly 2011)?; and why is it that China and Japan are still mired in a vicious cycle of mutual animosity, with their relations stagnating in a “shallow reconciliation” that oscillates unstably between unconvincing rapprochement and dangerous friction, while other antagonistic parties of WWII have forged ahead with reconciliation (He 2011)?

3 By examining the official remembrance of the War in contemporary China, we may not be able to solve all the intriguing puzzles, but we will be moving one step further toward that ultimate goal and contributing to the eventual achievement of regional reconciliation and peace.

Encouragingly, in the last two decades, scholars of modern Chinese history have made impressive progress in mapping out the official memory terrain of the War in China, and identified a curious memory “curve” that features a repressive stage in the Maoist era and a surge of official revision in the post-Mao period. This chapter reviews these endeavors, focusing on the so-called later “revision” of official narrative. It critiques and qualifies some of the conclusions drawn from these previous studies. Drawing on recent theoretical development in the field of collective memory scholarship, I demonstrate how the grand narrative about the War as prescribed and promulgated by the Chinese government in the post-Mao era retains many of the basic narrative structures, interpretative framework, and rhetorical and aesthetic features inherited from public discourses in Maoist China. Owing to the highly path-dependent nature of collective remembrance, the official revision of the War, regardless the instrumental purpose it is intended to serve, remains ultimately limited in both its scope and depth: its effects are yet to be examined. This chapter also harbors humble theoretical aspiration to irradiate the “black box” that has hitherto enveloped the mechanism via which previous memories function to shape and constrain the formation of later remembrance.

Literature review: War memory “curve” and official narrative revision in post-Mao China

In the last two decades, China’s War history and memory have drawn wide attention from both inside and outside of Chinese society. This community of China/War experts, equipped with a theoretical and methodological edge generated by interdisciplinary vigor, has since made admirable progress in exploring a field that few have trodden before. A most recognizable theme has come to the fore quite consistently and repeatedly: the existence of a memory “curve,” where an earlier “silence” or “suppression” was replaced by “resurgence” of new remembrance in the later periods. Mitter and Moore (2011), for instance, claim that the rekindled intellectual interests and endeavors in recent years have pushed the history of the War in China from a “historiographical
“penumbra” where it was never discussed “in its own right” into the center of the historical agenda (227). This repositioning into the center is a telling evidence of how the War memory and history are back within the spectrum of public attention.

Among the works on this memory “curve” motif, a few stand out as particularly relevant to this discussion as they focus upon the collective remembrance of the War in contemporary Chinese society. In his paper titled “China’s New Remembering of World War II,” for instance, Waldron (1996) uses the case of a famous Kuomintang (KMT) military general, Zhang Zizhong, who died in a particularly savage battle against the invading Japanese army in 1940. His analysis shows how memory of the devastating war was first suppressed and then restored in the People’s Republic. According to Waldron, both the processes of suppression and restoration are closely linked to concurrent political circumstances. But at the same time, they must also be understood more broadly as the demonstration of “the shift in stress, in attempts at regime legitimation, from previously dominant iconoclastic and utopian communist ideas toward nationalistic and patriotic themes” (947).

In similar veins, Mitter (2003), in his article “Old Ghosts, New Memories: China’s Changing War History in the Era of Post-Mao Politics,” also observes the emerging trend of a new remembrance of the War in China. Drawing on newly published historiographical and popular works, and the construction of museums and memorials as his materials, Mitter contends that this new trend was “one of the most powerful, but in the West least-known reconfigurations of history” (Mitter 2003: 118). Mitter describes how the most traumatic of wars in the 20th century was overshadowed by the paramount political exigency of an internecine conflict, and the way in which the memory was dealt with rather “cursorily” in the public sphere until the 1970s (Ibid.). Like Waldron, Mitter accounts for the new memories of the past events within the contemporary political context of China. He argues that the reconfiguration of history is the result of four interactive socio-political conditions: the need to find a legitimating ideology in the face of the collapse of Marxism, the intention to reunify with Taiwan, “the quest to bind the Chinese together in the face of forces which are driving society apart” (2003: 121), and the desire to enter the international community. The result was, he argues, the coexistence of dichotomous images of China both as a victim and as a great power.

Unlike Waldron and Mitter, Coble (2007) does not use any specific case studies in his article titled “China’s ‘New Remembering’ of the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance, 1937–1945.” He rather offers a detailed description of the new academic trend and achievements in the WWII research field during the reform era. Like Mitter, Coble also links the emergence of these works to the government’s increasing emphasis on patriotic nationalism and its attempts to reunify with Taiwan. Furthermore, he argues that the new trend of remembering is featured in two themes: the patriotic narrative that stresses the heroic resistance, and an emphasis on China’s victimization developed around a “number game in which the emphasis of historical writing is to maximize the sheer number of victims” (Coble 2011: 398).

Writing about the War museum representation, Denton (2007) also identifies a juxtaposition of two conflicting narratives, though his findings add a temporal element to the phenomenon. He finds that while the “victor” narrative seems to have been the dominant discourse in Mao’s era, a contrasting theme of suffering and victimization has emerged as the motif of the new war remembrance. Similar to the aforementioned scholars, he connects the surfacing of this new theme to a shift to nationalism in which the government has used the device of “emotionality of atrocities” as part of its legitimation project. It was to supersede the declining and potentially subversive message of revolutionary class struggle (Lee and Yang 2007: 16). He further argues, resonating with Mitter, that remembering the war in the same mode that the West memorializes the Holocaust, and emphasizing it as an indispensable part of the international resistance against fascism, would facilitate China’s efforts to join the global community.
In her seminal article “Remembering and Forgetting the War: Elite Mythmaking, Mass Reaction, and Sino-Japanese Relations, 1950–2006,” He (2007) also deals with the shift in the war memory of China, but she does it from a unique perspective of political science that adds new insights into the topic. Arguing that historical memories are constantly subjected to the manipulation of ruling elites who weave narratives and stories into national myths for instrumental purposes, He aptly places the shift in the war memory within an integrated explanatory framework encompassing both internal conflict and external political exigency. According to He, while the Chinese ruling elites focused on “geostrategic interests” and produced a quasi-convergent narrative to avoid outright confrontation with Japan until the 1970s, “a strong sense of insecurity in domestic politics” (45) drove the CCP elite to exploit historiographical differences that reinforced international history disputes. Compared to aforementioned studies, He was more specific and articulate by identifying some of the fundamental “myths” constructed by the efficient CCP propaganda machines, myths such as the clear distinction between “the small handful of Japanese militarists” and ordinary Japanese people redefined as the fellow victims of Jingoism.

Despite their distinct approaches and subtly varied perspectives, under the general focus on the memory “curve,” these works share two concrete consensuses. They are confirmed or, at least partially supported by a myriad of other studies either directly or indirectly (see Alexander & Gao 2012[2007]; Coble 2011; Cohen 2003; Diamant 2011; Gao 2011; Gries 2004; He 2011; Mitter & Moore 2011; Reilly 2011; Wang 2008; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2006; Yang 2001). The first consensus is that the official remembrance of the War in post-Mao China represents a radical departure from how the War had been narrated and remembered in the public sphere until the 1980s. Although different expressions such as “silence,” “suppressed memory,” or “cultural amnesia” are used, they agree that the CCP government in Maoist China preferred “to downplay atrocities suffered by the Chinese” (Coble 2011: 396) and instead promoted a heroic narrative of resistance. A revolutionary master narrative of class struggle, highlighting the courageous and sagacious leadership of the Party in contrast to the cowardice, corruption and incompetence of the archenemy KMT and its American imperialist master, once completely overshadowed the war narrative. This triumphant “China as victor” discourse, however, was slowly but powerfully replaced by an obsessive attention to the “victimization” of Chinese people at the hands of the Japanese invaders in the post-Mao era. The unspeakable cruelty inflicted by the Japanese military began to occupy the center of the current remembrance praxis, which in turn formed a key component of the nationalistic identity of today’s China.

The strong nationalistic tint in the new remembrance leads to a second consensus shared by many studies on the War memories. When explaining the official “revision,” an instrumental “presentist” approach is the usual norm (Olick & Robbins 1998) that the past can be manipulated to serve the present for it “is a particularly useful resource for expressing interests” by certain groups (128). Whether it was the internal urgency to rebuild the legitimacy of the Party, or to manage new challenges of the post-Cold War structure, current political exigency has stood at the very center of the analytical framework that most scholars have used to contextualize the surfacing of the revised official narrative. A most significant component of this project was obviously the patriotic education campaign in the early 1990s (Coble 2011; Cohen 2003; Gries 2004; He 2011; Reilly 2011; Wang 2008; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2006; and Yang 2001). Most studies mention this top-down nationwide mobilization campaign, which targeted the Chinese youth as the key agent of the drastic shift in the war-related discourse. With a detailed and lucid documentation of the campaign, Wang (2008)’s article serves as a good summary of this shared understanding: as the Party skilfully used history education to arouse people’s consciousness of the “century of humiliation,” public attention was diverted from domestic concern to foreign enemies, and the reinvigorated memory of Chinese sufferings was cleverly deployed as an
essential ideological toolkit that the Party conveniently found to counter the centrifugal forces driving the nation apart and to consolidate a new patriotic nationalistic identity.

These consensuses are very insightful and help to form a solid foundation upon which I develop my argument, but they are not without limitations. One of them is that both the “presentist” explanatory framework and the shared overemphasis placed upon the radical shift in the official war memories effectively assume that the past is infinitely malleable and can be constantly reconstructed to serve the pragmatic purpose of the ruling elite. Such an instrumentalist position, however, has long been cast in doubts and criticized due to the remarkable “persistence” of the past and signs of the limits of its manipulability. Schudson (1992), for instance, famously argues “the past is in some respects, and under some conditions, highly resistant to efforts to make it over.” Schwartz (1991, 1996) documents how “certain pasts are constitutive elements of political cultures, and these endure as long as the political culture is not completely superseded” (Olick & Robbins 1998:129). Even when radically new pasts emerge, they often “superimpose themselves over older versions without eliminating them” (129). More importantly, whether through change or persistence, the mnemonic dynamics of the past are also a function of its own history and memories as texts, and therefore the way in which the “original” event had been remembered in the past plays a most crucial role in forming the new pasts (Olick & Levy 1997).

If memories as texts, or established narratives about a past event, are intrinsically path-dependent, and resist and constrain later attempts at revision, then how exactly does the “new” remembrance of the War differ from the previous version? To what degree is the revision a departure from the old version, and in what specific aspects is it new? Under the surface of exuberant resurgence and change, is there any latent continuity between the simplistic and reductionist Maoist interpretation of the War and the current boisterous commemoration and memory? These questions remain unanswered in the previous studies. The constant manipulability assumption leads them to highlight the “novelty” of resurgence, while dismissing the previous versions as merely the default “suppression” stage, a taken-for-granted reference point for later change. At the same time, they fail to give sufficient attention to the structures of meaning innate in the contents of memory and thereby neglect to address the resiliency of older images of the past.

In the following, I will offer a detailed textual analysis, or a “hermeneutic reconstruction,” of the official war narratives in post-Mao China. A cultural approach does not guarantee better answers to the aforementioned questions, but it would help to shed light on the crucial role played by culture embodied by previous narrative constructions of the War, in defining and shaping the later revisions. This aspect has largely been ignored hitherto by scholars writing on this topic. I argue that resilient cultural structures such as mnemonic relics constructed during Maoist China continue to exert substantial influence on today’s society, and significantly regulate and constrain the official revision in the succeeding era. I also explain in detail how the older images command the present memory through two different mechanisms. In doing so, I draw on commemoration articles, history textbooks, movies and museums, as these evidence constitute the canonical version of the historical narrative in contemporary societies (Hein & Selden 2000).

Official commemoration articles and two mechanisms of continuity

To have a glimpse of the official war remembrance during the post-Mao era, the commemoration articles on special occasions such as memorial days or the War anniversaries are very useful (see chapter 1 in this volume). And no other commemoration articles can be more authoritative than the public speech manuscript and monographs drafted by no less than the President of the country. Thereby I turn to President Hu Jintao’s public speech during the 60th anniversary celebration of the war victory in 2005 (Hu 2005). Comparing it with Vice President Lin Piao’s
most influential and widely circulated monograph on the occasion of the 20th anniversary in 1965 will effectively reveal the scope of revision and continuity.

A comparative reading of the texts confirms two major points regarding revision. Hu’s commemoration article confirmed the findings made in previous studies. While Vice President Lin launched a vehement and prolonged diatribe against the KMT enemy who were not only completely denied of their resistance activities, but were emphatically singled out as the main arch-enemy of Chinese people and demonized with vitriolic words such as “treacherous,” “brutal,” “ruthless,” “cowardly,” and as having perpetrated unforgivable “massacre” and “slaughter,” in President Hu’s article that appeared 40 years later, the front battle fought by the KMT-led armed forces was finally acknowledged, and the KMT was no longer identified as the worst antagonist but recast rather positively as a resistance force, an alliance, albeit an incompetent and sometimes indecisive one, with the CCP. Second, along with this “redemption” of the KMT, Hu’s article recoded the Japanese imperial army as the “unequivocal” enemy, primarily demonstrated by a short reference to the Nanking Massacre, and the biological and chemical warfare inflicted on Chinese. This poses a sharp contrast to Lin’s version wherein not a single war crime committed by the Japanese forces was mentioned in the entire 68 pages, and this apparent and official camp of foes, in whose name the war was fought, was rigorously diminished to a distant and faceless image whose identity was cast in the grey zone of ambiguity bordering the sacred and the profane (Lin 1965).

But the boundary of revision in President Hu’s speech, with one extra point of a newly placed significance on China’s membership in the allied force, was thus delimited. In comparison with the revision, it is the consistency and continuity between the two articles separated by four decades in time that strikes one as more salient. Indeed, Hu’s speech dedicated seven pages of the entire 26 page-long monograph to explicating how the current Chinese government would lead the Chinese people to achieve more prosperity and success. But still, one would have the illusion that Chairman Lin’s article was simply reprinted and republished again for a new round of circulation if the recent text was accompanied by a long and unabashed eulogy to Chairman Mao. Most of the essential narrative structures and features that characterized Lin’s article were retained in Hu’s new speech with little cosmetic makeover. Of all the 26 pages of Hu’s speech, for instance, echoing Lin’s endless bragging about the CCP, an entire four pages (pp. 4–8) were dedicated to the Party’s self-glorification of the heroic achievement where the only two major military victories that the CCP armed forces had ever won during its entire history of confrontation with the Japanese army, the “triumph in Pinxing Valley,” and the “Great Battles of One Hundred Battalions,” were lauded with self-intoxicating enthusiasm. Similarly, corresponding to Lin’s exultant celebration of the victory, another entire seven pages (pp. 9–16) of Hu’s speech were a gushy ode to the significance of the war victory for the Chinese people and the world. Most amazingly, 40 years after Vice President Lin pompously boasted about the unsurpassable might of the so-called “People’s warfare,” when the actual effectiveness of this warfare had been put into question, the various forms of the people’s war, exemplified by the “tunnel warfare” and the “landmine warfare,” were still acclaimed without any restraint as “a spectacular miracle in the human history,” and as a war of heroes who had trampled down upon the Japanese invaders, who, only for a while, seemed to be on the rampage (Hu 2005: 8).

If in the places of continuity, President Hu was virtually reiterating the stories recounted by Vice President Lin, with all the previous narrative patterns, binary codes, rhetorical features and interpretative framework intact, even the places of revision remarkably manifest a reflection of consistency. In the case of the redefinition of the enemy, for example, although the target was shifted from the KMT and other class enemies to the Japanese imperialists in Hu’s speech, the Japanese were never a general category; rather, a clear line of distinction was consistently drawn
between the “tiny bunch of Japanese Jingoists,” the perpetrators, and the “overwhelming majority of Japanese people,” the innocent victims. On maintaining a friendly relationship with Japan, for instance, President Hu stated this:

The invasion war unleashed by the Japanese Jingoists in modern period not only brought tremendous catastrophe to the Chinese people, but also deeply victimized the Japanese people. Those who had schemed and waged the invasion war were only a tiny faction of Japanese Jingoists. After the war, people of all walks of life in Japan demonstrated their courage in facing up to the historical truth of the invasion war, and strongly condemned the war atrocities committed by the invaders in China. Many of the former Japanese soldiers who had participated in the war genuinely repented what they had done, and tried to promote Sino-Japanese friendship in solid actions and had done many useful work. Their conscience and courage should be highly appreciated. (Hu 2005: 23)

Innate opposition attributed to the Japanese camp obviously echoed the predominant binary code that was at the center of “the communist trauma of class struggle,” a prevalent cultural structure that dictated the organization of social meanings in Mao’s China (Gao 2011). According to this powerful grand narrative, the fundamental conflict of society is inherently defined along the horizontal strata based on class struggle, where proletariats of the world must form a sacred universalist fraternity. The Japanese workers and peasants, therefore, even when recruited into the imperialist army, were insistently perceived “as innocent victims subjected to the poisoning and exploitation of the Jingoist ruling class.” Their victimhood in the class relationship was an assurance that they could be easily converted and retrieved back to the righteous proletariat camp for camaraderie (Gao 2011). Vice President Lin proudly claimed the following 40 years earlier:

During the anti-Japanese war we . . . succeeded in converting not a few Japanese prisoners who had been badly poisoned by fascist ideology. After they were politically awakened, they organized themselves into anti-war organizations such as the League for the Liberation of the Japanese People, the Anti-War League of the Japanese in China and the League of Awakened Japanese, helped us to disintegrate the Japanese army and co-operated with us in opposing Japanese militarism. Comrade Sanzo Nosaka, the leader of the Japanese Communist Party, who was then in Yenan, gave us great help in this work. (Lin 1965: 30)

It is quite clear that Hu’s “reconfiguration” in the identification of the “real” enemy was still influenced by the lingering powerful binary code reflecting on the universalistic class logic of the Maoist era. Even if the official intention was to incite a nationalist sentiment against Japan, the recent symbolic re-coding is subjected to unremitting persistence of past memories and cultural representations remaining effective until present.

Concerning another point of variance in Hu’s speech, the articulation of war atrocities that many scholars claim to have paved the road for a later official turn toward victim discourse, the underlying consistency seems less straightforward. It is perhaps because narrative of war atrocities was completely absent from Lin’s monograph, just as they were drastically toned down and practically whitewashed from the entire public sphere in Mao’s China (Gao 2011: 129–133). Upon careful reading, however, one can still notice how the presentation of war atrocities was also contextualized within a familiar narrative framework that not only shaped
the understanding of the War in previous decades, but continues to regulate the official remembrance today.

The elements of this narrative construction are found in the high degree of consistency and similarity between the two texts as discussed above: both Vice President Lin’s exultant celebration and President Hu’s effusive acclamation demonstrate a progressive historical teleology that recounts the War with an “ascending narrative”; this framework not only emphasizes the ultimate significance of triumphant happy ending, but also features a romanticized glorification of the war experience. Hu vigorously reassured the reader of the speech with the following:

After the war victory, the trials of Nazi German war criminals by the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal and the Japanese war criminals by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East brought the due punishments to those who had unleashed invasion wars and who had their hands dipped in the blood of people of all countries, justice of the world had been served, human dignities preserved, and the common wishes of all the people of the world who love peace and justice fulfilled (Hu 2005: 14)

As if concerned that knowledge of war atrocities would have been unbearable for people, Hu attempted to underscore the historical justice that had been thoroughly served at the end of the War. By fiercely constructing a perfect sense of closure of the War, which Hu claimed to have been secured by due punishment of war criminals, he reasserted the hyper upbeat and simplistically optimistic attitude characterizing the official grand narrative about the War in Mao’s China. In this grand narrative, the war was portrayed as a fiercely heroic, childishly romantic story that always ended happily with a festive victory (Gao 2011: 159–194). The victorious happy ending, according to this official story, possesses the magical healing power that can alone soothe the pain, cure the wounded and justify all the terrible loss incurred during the War. In similar veins, while President Hu documented war atrocities and asserted victimhood of Chinese in his speech, he was anxiously trying to turn the page from the gruesome war scenes to the bright vision of victory, and hastily called upon the people not to dwell on the painful past of anguish, but to move onward toward a better future predestined by China’s historical progress.

Interestingly, while certain symbolic space was assigned to the narration of war sufferings because of, as scholars have argued, an official will to shift the discursive focus from the glittering victory to the dismal tragedy, Hu’s speech shows that this reclaimed symbolic space was still configured in the same triumphalist narrative framework that had been entrenched over the decades. In other words, the war sufferings and trauma were never narrated for their own sake, they were instead contained within the glorious and heroic narrative pattern. This shallow acknowledgment, whereby sufferings and trauma were perfunctorily recorded and then swiftly locked away on the high shelves of historical storehouse, does not permit the emergence of “trauma” claim, or the formation of collective identity as victimized group (Alexander et al. 2004). The War’s mnemonic value mattered only so much as not to overshadow the unshakable significance of the victory, and the trauma was mitigated so as not to discredit the glorious war resistance. Once again, previous memories embedded in cultural structures reveal their resiliency in affecting the presentist revisionism.

The underlying consistency as demonstrated by President Hu’s commemoration article effectively reaffirms the persistence of previous memories and cultural influences over time: older images of the past serve as an essential element of collective representation, and thereby continue
to impose formidably upon the current makeover efforts. Between the apparent variance and salient similarity, two distinctive mechanisms where “the past commands the present” can be identified. First, powerful cultural structures that prevailed in the public sphere and significantly shaped the memory construction of the War back in the Maoist era, as exemplified by the triumphalist narrative framework and the communist class binary, remain influential in the post-Mao era as the constitutive elements of a broad political culture that stays largely unchanged, and continue to exert substantial influence upon the current narrative about the War. Second, “chips and chunks” of previous war memories, “crystallized” idioms, catchphrases or simple repetition of narrative, represented in our case by the almost identical blustering on the people’s warfare in both Lin’s and Hu’s monograph, are reused as ready-made cultural “building blocks.” These “material” building blocks, infused with communist rhetoric, contain the original layers of semiotics, and their direct incorporation into the later official construction is bound to engender a robust continuity between two different time periods.

Mechanism of resilient cultural structures: Revision and history texts

The functioning of both mechanisms in the official narrative construction of the War in contemporary China can be attested to by ample traces and evidence. Compared to the prevalence of the cultural “building blocks” in the present narrative, the less manifest but more resilient of the two mechanisms, the persistence of the underlying cultural structures, appears to function more saliently in the emerging “victim” discourse, the major component of the current official revision. In their article on the absence and resurgence of the Nanking Massacre memory in China, for instance, Alexander and Gao (2012) documented how People’s Daily, the mouthpiece of CCP, tried to dilute citizen anger when the Nanking Massacre became a hot issue in the 1980s. They found that “for every article accusing the Japanese government of irresponsible behavior, there must be a counteracting article demonstrating how the ordinary Japanese people have shown sincere repentance and are now the true friends of Chinese people” (Alexander and Gao 2012: 597–598; chapter 12 in this volume). Obviously, this case shows the resilient persistence of the communist class binary, one in which the canonical version has been replaced by its softer and subtler derivation as the “ruling elite vs. ordinary citizens.” In the same vein, curator Zhu Chengshan (2005), in his preface to the memorandum on the 20th anniversary of the Nanking Massacre museum opening, stated how “friendly” Japanese people stood with the Chinese people in fighting against the “tiny bunch of Jingoistic rightists” in Japan:

Right-wing forces in Japan, represented by Ishihara, had attempted once again to deny the Massacre, using so-called academic evidence. . .however, we are united with progressive scholars and people of Japan like . . . made timely and effective counterargument to preserve historical truths . . .

(Preface)

Unmistakably presented in these words is another contemporary derivation of the communist binary: “the small handful of reactionary rightists vs. the overwhelming majority progressive people.” As a soft version of the “sacred” proletarian Bolshevik, the signifier “people” seems to have kept all the potent holiness endowed back from the dreamy days of internationalist idealism, and remains immune to any ideological pollution. Equally, the abstract yet carefully delimited category of “the tiny bunch of Jingoist rightists” inherited all of the symbolic profanity from the past signifier “class enemies” and became the arch-devil responsible for all that went wrong during the War and since.
Similarly, in a compilation of records of the war atrocities published in 1995 (Li et al. 1995), the author of the preface, Yang Chengwu, a famous CCP military general, after confirming the truthfulness of the records, pointed out right away with an internationalist logic that

this war had also brought countless tragedies to the Japanese people, leaving them bereaved of their beloved ones . . . the purpose of exposing the savage war crimes committed by the Japanese imperialism in China is to prompt people of both countries and the later generations to learn from history and not to repeat the sufferings of Chinese people or the Japanese people.

(Preface, p. 2)

Again, underlying this intentional juxtaposition of sufferings of both peoples is the typical “red” universalistic ideas where Japanese people were portrayed emphatically as fellow victims of the War, and the evil perpetrators of war crimes vigorously abstracted into a fuzzy concept of “Japanese imperialism,” thereby merely updating the simplistic demarcation of the world along one horizontal line (Gao 2011).

Classic communist binary is not the only cultural structure that remains resilient in later historical period. The “ascending” narrative framework, with its hyperbolic teleological interpretation and the near narcissistic glorification of war experience, also retains its symbolic vitality and remains the predominant structure shaping the official war narrative revision. School history textbooks reveal the evidence for this.

As a primary material for CCP’s patriotic education campaign, school history textbooks since the mid-1990s contain substantial historical revision of the War (Coble 2011; He 2011; Reilly 2011; Wang 2008). My own findings confirm that history textbooks for junior high school students published since 1994 represent a departure from previous editions, with two major points of revision almost identical with President Hu’s speech: the “semiotic hierarchy” between KMT and the Japanese invading army that used to be one of defining features of the Maoist narrative has been reversed by an unambiguous redefinition of the enemy camp; and the once strictly “sanitized” picture of the War where Chinese sufferings were thoroughly suppressed for the sake of the communist “class fraternity” was replaced with an explicit presentation of war atrocities inflicted by the Japanese military (Gao 2011).

A careful reading, however, shows clearly again that the rosy Maoist undercurrent lies beneath these major revisionist contents. Its quiet but dynamic buoyancy can hardly be suppressed. In the 2002 edition of Chinese History for Junior High School, the concluding paragraph of the last chapter on the War, for instance, reads like this:

The victory in the War of Resistance brought to a glorious end the consecutive failures that the Chinese people had endured in their one hundred years of anti-foreign invasion struggle, scoured away the humiliation suffered by the nation in its modern history, and was the turning point from decline to growth for the Chinese nation. The people of China made a huge contribution to the world’s anti-fascist war paying with huge sacrifice.

(History Room of the People’s Education Press 2002: 65)

One cannot miss in this paragraph the ultimate symbolic significance placed upon the final victory, the glorious end that vindicates all the preceding trials and tribulations. By defining the War as the important turning point of the nation’s destiny, the text not only echoes with Vice Chairman Lin’s (1965) monograph, where he extolled the War as the first anti-imperialist
war to “end in complete victory” (1), but also augurs presciently President Hu’s speech, which attributes to the happy ending a powerful healing magic. What is at work is the unmistakable optimism and historical teleology, important strands of the underlying cultural structures that prevail over time.

More revealing is the narrative’s recording of war atrocities and sufferings, which is usually adorned with what I call a “compulsory enfranchisement of heroic resistance will.” The 1994 edition of the *Nine-Year Compulsory Education Three-Year Junior Middle School Textbook Chinese History* has one such example. When describing the 1941 massacre that occurred in the Pan Jiayu village of Hebei province, a part of the CCP-led base area, the text states that the mass killing happened because of the villagers’ resistance where they “would rather die than divulge information” to the Japanese forces about the whereabouts of the eighth route army” (84). As a consequence, 1,230 out of 1,537 villagers were mercilessly slaughtered. Clearly, as often the case in Maoist China, a heroic resistance will was imposed upon the villagers. The tragic incident might have been a wanton mass killing perpetrated by the invading army, but was (re)constructed as a meaningful confrontation where the Chinese people made the heroic choice of sacrificing their own lives for the just cause.

Rendered manifest in this case is how the narrative reenactment of victimhood and depiction of war atrocities, especially on the part of the so-called revolutionary Chinese in the CCP-led base areas, is powerfully constrained by the hysterical glorification and romanticization typical of the grand triumphalist narrative. Evoking a “David vs. Goliath” type of binary, this persistent and robust cultural structure precludes the emergence of a “hapless and helpless” victimhood genre and constrains the symbolic weight attributed to war sufferings. This curious sense of reluctance or superficiality permeating the acknowledgment of victimization, as also detected in President Hu’s speech, has become the signature character of the current official revision. This again testifies to the recalcitrant influence of persistent cultural structures.

**Mechanism of cultural relics: The tunnel war and the military museum**

In comparison with the more latent mechanisms whereby resilient and powerful underlying cultural structures continue to shape the current representation of the War, the mechanism of “building blocks” is much more ubiquitous, potent and prominent. The handy “off-the-rack” mnemonic relics carry with them not only the effective dictating force of those persistent cultural structures, but also the more visceral and tangible memory animated with specific narrative patterns, aesthetic qualities, discursive traits, and characteristics of rhetoric, all preserved vividly fresh and delivered from the past to the present as if contained within a time capsule immune to change. Due to tremendous historical inertia, they render the current remembrance of the War more a copy of the past memories than a revision, and these traces are found in many mnemonic practices of the public sphere today.

A good example is the myth of the “tunnel warfare,” which was jubilantly celebrated in both Vice President Lin and President Hu’s commemoration articles separated by four decades. The fact that all editions of history textbooks throughout the PRC’s existence, including the later editions, carry the same self-glorifying introduction of the warfare, affirms once again the unparalleled symbolic potency and persistency of this legendary piece of cultural relic. To understand the tremendous influence of this singular mnemonic relic and its gigantic presence in current remembrance of the War, one must first turn to the historical path whereby the myth was originally forged.

To a large extent, the myth of this factually dubious war tactic was originated by its namesake movie, *The Tunnel Warfare*, produced by the People’s Liberation Army August First Film
Cacophonous memories

Production Studio in 1965. Intended as a military pedagogical movie with the explicit goal of demonstrating the superiority of “people’s warfare,” the movie, though claimed to be based on real historical events, painted the experience and battle of the War with an exceedingly jubilant and narcissist touch. The plot, for example, seriously challenged the acceptable boundary of historical facts, and the reenactment of battle scene distantly surpassed even the omnipotent framework of ascending romance of the War constructed in Maoist China. No doubt all the entrenched rhetoric and aesthetic features salient over the years were present in the movie. They include the “zero” casualty rule on “our” side, the fairy-tale-like plot, the rosy ambience, the miraculous triumph and the polarized stereotypes of both the hysterically heroic Chinese protagonists and the absurdly dwarfed and caricaturized Japanese antagonists. Only in this movie, these elements were played up to an absurd, unprecedented scale that soared to the acme of human fantasy. As the result, the War as depicted came to resemble a toddler’s cartoon where cute little Jerry was poking fun with poor Tommy cat, a “mass carnival beneath the ground” (Li 2005: 348) that was suffused with a mesmerizing and surreal aura of cheerfulness and euphoria.

The mythical status to which the movie eventually ascended to was the consequence of the working of history’s uncanny course. As the country was plunged into the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, all the new movie productions were forced to stop and the old ones were prohibited from public viewing. The Tunnel Warfare, with its inborn red political sacredness, became one of the only four movies allowed to be screened in the entire nation between 1966 and 1970 (Huangfu 2006; Li 2005; Ni 2004). The destitute shortage of options explains the distributions of 2,800 copies of the movie over the years, a record that has never been broken since then. And it also explains the reason why the film became one of the most watched movies in Chinese history, as the movie director, Ren Xudong, once recollected with pride: “whether in the cities or in the countryside, wherever I go these days, I find that there is not a single person over their 50 who had not watched the movie, and what is more, they all had watched more than once. I am very satisfied with this movie and there is nothing left for me to regret” (Li 2005: 350).

Indeed, the movie is estimated to have been viewed 1.8 billion times in a country with a population of 1.3 billion. This means the average person watched it more than once. And for millions of Chinese, especially the generation whose coming of age was around the “monopoly” of the movie era, every single line in the script or a frame of the pictures from the movie was an indispensable part of their childhood memory. The Tunnel Warfare not only fulfilled their adolescent yearnings for adventure and exhilaration, but also brought them the strong vicarious pleasure of being the valiant warriors on a battlefield that they had never been. For these kids who were to become the ruling elites of the country in the 1990s, the movie did not merely narrate and represent the War, it was the war. The medium became the content, and it was difficult to tell the real war from the war film. A hyper-delusional propaganda that verges on wild fantasy and outright fabrication was thus inscribed at the center of collective memories of generations of Chinese and crystallized into a myth glowing with the halo of truthfulness and factuality.

The mythical package of the tunnel warfare has since been broadly circulating throughout the society as a consecrated and crucial building block of the memory of the War that no one can afford to skip over. The legendary tale was constantly told and retold to the public, for instance, through printed media, as exemplified by the preceding examples of paragraphs in authoritative commemoration articles, history textbooks, and by the publication and republication of news reports, novels, books, pamphlets, and even children’s stories all focusing on the theme. It is also a literal showcase as a prominent and permanent section of the exhibition in two of the most well-known and popular museums themed on the War in today’s China: the exhibition hall of the War of Resistance in the Chinese People’s Revolutionary Military Museums, and the Museum of the War of Chinese People’s Resistance Against Japanese Aggression.
While these two museums are often perceived to be representing respectively orthodox Maoist remembrance and the later revision efforts, they both vividly recreate the stage setting of a battle scene of the tunnel war with a three-dimensional miniature model that is exactly as depicted in the movie. The biggest difference between the two exhibits perhaps is that the former features tiny and solid statuettes that remain static and quiet, the latter uses a high-tech live visual and audio simulation of the battle scene where the movements of miniature figures in the movie are reenacted via a digital projection accompanied by authentic sound effects.

More revealing of this mythical building block is perhaps the frequency and scope with which the original movie is still being screened in today’s China. Canonized as one of the “one hundred selected films” (Wang 2008: 797), a central component of the patriotic education campaign launched by CCP authority, screening of the movie is not only recommended but implemented as an important part of the in-class or extracurricular activities required for tens of millions of school-aged children. In addition, together with other films produced in Maoist era, the movie also makes regular appearance every summer and winter on the movie channel of (CCTV) (China Central Television). It therefore plays a key role in the biannual reinvigoration of a propaganda campaign targeting those youth with more leisure time to sit before their TV sets during school holidays. To meet the new demands of the audience, especially young people, the movie was adapted into a brand new TV series in 2010. The TV version has a more tenable plot and sophisticated cast of characters, and claimed to have received fairly positive audience reviews, which seems to prove that the old wine still sells well in new bottles. While it is hard to quantify the scope of the impact and its various forms of adaptations, with compulsory education and TV channels becoming the major venues of publicizing, we can reasonably assume that this legendary piece of mnemonic relic still wields formidable power over the public remembrance of the War in today’s China. And its caricaturized heroes and childishly festive stories still induce strong fascination among many youth, just as it used to mesmerize and intoxicate their parents.

The tunnel war is but one epitome typical of the innumerable cultural building blocks that are still saliently visible and widely circulated in the current official remembrance of the War. Another interesting example and a larger chunk of the cultural relic is the aforementioned thematic exhibition on the War presented in the Chinese People’s Revolutionary Military Museum, which was and still remains as one of the national level “demonstration bases” for patriotic education.

The museum was first opened to the public on August 1, 1960, and the exhibition theme went through two major changes (Interview August 20, 2009). The first change happened in 1985, when the front battle conducted by the KMT regime was first acknowledged and incorporated into the exhibition; and the second change occurred from 1997 to 2004, when a general feeling was expressed that the exhibition was too obsolete and an overhaul had been carried out resulting in the current version. Yet, despite the curator’s proud assertion that all the renovation and revisions were meant to “show respect to historical truth” and to “give back history its true face,” the “truth” presented at the current exhibition are almost exactly the same as the “truth” one could get from Maoist China.

Indeed, as one meanders in the huge and grandiose hall, one gets to wonder if the clock was turned back to the 1960s, the time when The Tunnel Warfare was being screened in every movie theater of the country; nothing appears to have changed. The entire exhibition remains an unabashed self-glorification to the Party; for the most part, as also the case in Vice President Lin’s commemoration article, the War is reduced to a remote background image where the Party’s achievements are relentlessly highlighted and acclaimed. An overwhelming majority of the exhibition units include the pictures that showcase the routine activities of the CCP leaders during the War period, and most of the objects for exhibition, besides weapons being either used against
or acquired from the Japanese armies, are simple daily utensils owned by these leaders such as their washing basin, lamp or bowl.

To this self-exaltation of the Party that renders no relevance to wartime experience, one must add the incurably romanticized “ascending” narrative framework. Besides those elevating portrayals of illustrious leaders, the rest of photos, without a single exception, picture jolly scenes of the CCP-led armed forces and revolutionary people: soldiers marching in neat lines, laughing gleefully with weapons just captured from the enemy proudly exhibited, watching stage performances, helping villagers building huts. Even the few pictures taken on the battleground do not show any sign of Chinese casualty; the soldiers were charging gallantly and ferociously, and no one was about to fall. With these cheerful and exciting images that are cleansed of the brutality of war and devoid of any sense of bereavement or sorrow, every and each of the resistance warriors is portrayed as purely heroic and happily invincible. And the victory comes to China just easily and naturally due to the bravery of the people and the sagacity of the Party. Unmistakably, what one witnesses in the exhibition is the Maoist construction of the War in its entirety with all the original taste and flavor remaining intact.

The ubiquitous and familiar communist binary opposition that distinguishes the Japanese people from the militant imperialist is also saliently present in the exhibition. There is an entire independent panel dedicated to the activities by “Anti-War Alliance of Japanese in China,” where the pictures of former Japanese soldiers and communist party members were working or fighting with Eighth Route Army are displayed. Their activities are enthusiastically praised. The fact that the binary used here is not even a subtler version characterizing the current official narrative, but the very crude communist model that identifies Japanese class brothers as redeemed comrades, deeply reveals once again how the exhibition must have remained almost intact from the Maoist era even after renovations and structural overhauls.

One has to admit though that revisions do exist in this otherwise “intact” cultural relic. One of the “enormous” revision feats achieved by the museum, as the curator so proudly claimed, was to include the KMT front battle activities. It was, however, exclusively limited to one window panel, even without the title on “front battle,” but subsumed as being a part of the exhibition theme on “the Protracted Period of the War.” Likewise, a unit titled “War Atrocities Perpetrated by Japanese Army” was obviously inserted in between two previously consecutive panels. Its contents awkwardly disrupt the flow of the exhibition. While designed as a window underpinning the construction of Chinese victimization, the effects of those murky pictures of war atrocity are counteracted by its symbolic isolation from the rest of the exhibition. At odds with the flow of the narrative and almost opposite to the romantic, heroic, glorious and victorious undertone of the entire exhibition, the “truthfulness” of this unit was cast into doubt and its “authenticity” severely compromised.

Despite the curator’s pompous claims, the scope and depth of revision in the exhibition is so minute that it can simply be dismissed as a tiny asterisk or footnote added sneakily into the main text. Apart from the trivial cosmetic attachment, the exhibition retains most of the very essences of its earlier version and remains one of the largest and most prominent cultural relics of Maoist memory of the War in today’s China. Just as how The Tunnel Warfare still inspires the imagination and dreams of many young people, the popular summer destination located in the military museum exerts influence on the shape of the collective memory of the War among the younger generation.

Apparently more manifest and straightforward, the “building block” mechanism exemplified by The Tunnel Warfare and the War exhibition in the military museum function more sophistica-
edly than the resilient cultural structure. If a resilient interpretative framework consistently con-
strains and predominates both the narrators and the narrative, the former functions in more than
one dimension. In one dimension, cultural relics are crucial and salient components of the older memories of the past and thereby exert substantial influence upon memories of later generations just like the resilient cultural structures. In another, because the building blocks tend to preserve themselves well in their original shape as if contained within a time capsule, they are more receptive to mnemonic inertia and are more immune to de- and reconstructive attempts. On the one hand, such a self-preserving nature renders cultural relics a more consequential element of resistance against revisionist efforts; on the other hand, it makes them more readily become instrumental to political actors. And this innate paradox makes it particularly difficult to detect and identify the role of cultural relics in the current official remembrance of the War. Indeed, the CCP regime is trying to promote patriotic nationalism and is consciously utilizing the War memories to achieve this goal by diverting public attention toward atrocities and victimhood. But when the elites make those cultural relics the centerpiece of the nationwide propaganda campaign, they are unwittingly reinforcing the older images of the War that is simplistic, romanticized, positive, heroic and triumphant. And these ironically lead them to virtually undo what they are trying to do.

Conclusion

It has been widely argued that official remembrance of the War in post-Mao Chinese society features a revisionist history and an explicit shift away from “China as victor” to “China as victim” discourse, implemented by the CCP authority to promote patriotic nationalism among the public and thereby rebuild its legitimacy under a severe challenge to its rule. In this chapter, I conduct a detailed hermeneutic analysis of the official narrative about the War in today’s China, and contend that this public remembrance features more continuity and consistency with Maoist memories than the “newness” or “departure” that often has been claimed by previous studies. I confirm that notable points of revision did occur, but argue that they are superficial in depth and limited in scope for being constrained by resilient previous cultural structures that still dominate the public sphere of today. These resilient cultural structures, I argue, represent one crucial mechanism whereby the past prevails over the present. I then identify the other major mechanism by which older images of the past are forged into cultural relics which function as ready-made building blocks in the current construction of memory. While the two mechanisms may differ subtly in their functions, both are playing prominent and significant roles in configuring and shaping the grand narrative about the War in post-Mao Chinese society.

Then how is the War being narrated and remembered in today’s China? To a certain extent, the exhibition in the military museum serves as an interesting metaphor. Revisions are underway and war atrocities are unambiguously displayed with the details of horrors. And yet these isolated “units” represent not the “norm” but the “exceptions,” a dispensable appendix attached to the main story about the War that has not changed much since it was first created in Maoist China. This is not a story about suffering or loss, but an inspiring tale about glory and triumph. Inundated by the spirit of hyperbolic optimism, childish romanticization and fierce heroism, depiction of war atrocities and victimhood remain oddly out of place, its presentation pathetically unconvincing and the covert motive behind it perniciously dubious. What happens to the general remembrance of the War, therefore, is not a simple replacement of victor’s discourse with victim narrative, or even the juxtaposition of both, but a cacophonous and inauthentic medley wherein the Maoist memories constrain and command the later constructions.

“The past, if not forgotten, is a guide to the future.”17 Yet the past can only guide the future when it is recorded faithfully for later generations. Regrettably, more than half a century has passed since the War ended, yet the historical truth of the War remains as murky and distorted as it was six decades ago. The official remembrance of the War in China, despite the emergence of
a victim discourse, is still predominated by a self-deceiving and self-serving narrative replete with bias, misrepresentations and even deliberate omission. Untruthful versions of history pose a challenge to achieving reconciliation with the fact that the War caused enormous human catastrophe to tens of millions of Chinese people. Consequential questions about the responsibility for the war also remain unanswered with individual Japanese soldiers generally portrayed as poisoned victims of their Jingoist government and exonerated of war crimes. The quest for responsibility is further diffused with the overused fuzzy excuse of “imperialism.” Serious moral and philosophical reflection on the ontological evilness of the demonic war atrocities rarely occurs, largely preempted by the reductionist Marxist historiography.

The absence of an enduring true reconciliation between the former victim and perpetrator countries is just another casualty of such misrepresented history. Reconciliation may be a function of the degree of memory convergence between former foes (He 2011), but such convergence must first be based on the convergence between memory and historical facts. In other words, a durable reconciliation cannot come into being until both parties involved reconcile honestly with their own history. For the peoples of China and other East Asian countries who yearn for a long-lasting peace, the poignant question posed by Mitter and Moore at the end of their article lingers on: “whose feelings are protected by covering our eyes with tales of heroism and national unity – or, worse still, silence and ‘oblivion’?” (2011: 240) The answer will never be found until all the historical truths about the War are disclosed to the public.

Notes

1 It seems that a consensus had been reached, at least among those western scholars of the War of Resistance (Chang 1997, Lary 2010, Li 2000, Van de Ven 2003, Waldron 1996, Yin & Young 1996) that the Japanese troops had been executing a “national terrorization” policy in China aiming to terrorize the Chinese into a horrified paralysis so that they would give up resistance and become docile and obedient subjects to Japanese occupation and rule, which resulted in extreme brutality and atrocity perpetrated by large numbers of Japanese soldiers. The telling cases of large-scale atrocities include, but not limited to, the Nanjing Massacre, the atrocious vivisection and various other “medical experiments” performed upon Chinese prisoners and civilians by the notorious special unit 731 of Kwangtung Army, the forced conscription of two million Chinese women as sex slaves, the horrible tortures and maltreatment that POWs and captured resistance fighters had been subjected to, the “burning all, killing all and destroying all” “mopping-up” campaigns and the viciously induced “no man’s land” along the latitude of the Great Wall that left all the villages in the area decimated. Recent findings made by Chinese historians also confirmed such consensus. For further reference and information in Chinese about horrendous war crimes perpetrated on the land of China by the Japanese invading army during WWII, please see Archives of CCP Central Committee et al. (2005), Chen (2005), Ding (2005), Gao et al. (2005), History Division of Military Science Academy (1991–1994), Li et al. (1995), the Ministry of Public Security Archives (2005), Shi (2005), Wu (2005), and Xie (2005).

2 A major shift in the public remembrance of the War emerged around the mid-1990s, marked by the official commemoration campaign centering on the 50th anniversary of the War victory in 1995. On the one hand, past traumas experienced by Chinese people during the War as represented by the Nanjing Massacre have been vigorously re-remembered and newly inscribed onto the centerpiece of the official memory by means of school textbook writing and memorial building (Coble 2007; Denton 2007; Mitter 2003; Waldron 1996). On the other hand, especially in the last decade, the Chinese people have been entertaining themselves on an unprecedented scale with a myriad of cultural products as TV series that use the War as an easily dramatizing historical backdrop and put on stage thoroughly unbelievable reenactments of war stories that would prove narcissistic and delusional even by the standards of the most hyperbolic historical parody. China experts and scholars both inside and outside of the country seem to have read what happened as consistent signs that mark a resurgence of memory of the War and an orchestrated collective endeavor to promote a patriotic nationalism that attempts to build a homogeneous national “we,” bound tightly together by blood and sacrifice against a usually demonized “enemy other.” I contend that public remembrance of the War in both the official and the quasi-popular
sphere (it is quasi owing to the overwhelming dominance and influence of official discourse in China over all social aspects including vernacular memory) are characterized with intrinsic tensions and contradictions, wherein a heroic “victor’s” discourse is intermingled with traumatic victimization, nationalistic sentiments are juxtaposed with universalist identification, and a relatively faithful depiction of history is usually overwhelmed by absurd historical comedies and farces; this is indeed one of the reasons I use “cacophonous” to describe the situation in the title of the chapter. To fully understand the chaotic nature of the public remembrance of the War in today’s China, therefore, it is of no avail to treat the memory as a monolithic whole; instead, one must probe deeply into the memory praxis of specific cultural spheres. It is with such belief that I focus exclusively on the official version of memory in this chapter and attempt to show that behind its apparently uniform façade, there is also innate conflict and inconsistency; this is another layer of implication that I assigned to the word “cacophonous” in the title.

3 For seven decades after the end of WWII, a regrettable absence of a deep interstate reconciliation between former belligerent countries, particularly China and Japan, has been haunting the otherwise dynamically developing East Asian region. Some argue that reconciliation is a function of the degree of memory convergence between ex-foes (He 2011), whereas others prioritize the necessity for candid acknowledgement of responsibility and forthright historical narrative (Alexander et al. 2004; Chang 1997; Li 2000; Yin & Young 1996). This chapter is predicated on the assumption that while history and memory are always socially and culturally constructed, and thereby always susceptible to manipulation made by political groups for certain instrumental goals, a true reconciliation can never be accomplished until both parties involved make sincere collective efforts towards a historical understanding that strives hard to approach historical “truths.”

4 The speech was given on September 3, 2005, and was then published as a monograph, as all the other important speeches made by CCP leaders, to be widely distributed and studied by CCP cadres of all levels and ordinary citizens in China. The original text is in Chinese and was translated by the author into English.

5 Lin Piao (1907–1971) served as the Vice-Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Vice-Premier of the State Council and concurrently Minister of National Defense at the time when the article was drafted. The title of the article was Long Live the Victory of People’s War! In Commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of Victory in the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japan. It was first released in People’s Daily on September 3, 1965 and was then quickly compiled and published as a monograph and translated into several foreign languages. Because of the author and the venue where it was first published, the symbolic significance of the article was beyond doubt. It would be the authoritative version that not only sets the overall tone for commemoration activities but also shapes and tailors the interpretation and collective memories of the War among the public.

6 For instance, except for one single adjective “barbarous” (Lin 1965:8), used only once when the nature of the war was being discussed, not any characterizing profane code heavier than this was attributed to the Japanese forces. From time to time, the Japanese were depicted as harboring the potential to become the loyal alliance of the sacred camp of CCP and revolutionary Chinese as Lin later proudly praised how the Japanese communist party and converted Japanese POWs contributed greatly to Chinese people’s resistance efforts.

7 Please see Ding (2005)’s document on what occurred in the tunnels in northern China during the large-scale “mopping-up” campaigns and discussions about the tunnel war in internet forum: http://history.people.com.cn/GB/205396/13476377.html, last accessed on February 6, 2012. The facts and effects of all types of people’s warfare have been put to serious doubt recently, with access to archive information becoming more available to the public and the appearance of internet forums where people can exchange ideas and conduct discussions more freely. Various sources have offered convincing evidence that many atrocious war crimes were perpetrated and mass sufferings happened exactly within tunnels or locations where these types of wars had been fought.

8 For my own dissertation research as well as this study, I read and analyzed the chapters that taught about the War in every edition of history textbooks for junior high school that have been published by the People’s Education Press, from 1949 to the most updated 2002 version. My findings basically confirmed claims made in previous studies that a remarkably high degree of consistency with Maoist editions is seen in history textbooks published throughout the 1980s till the mid-1990s, when the 1994 edition of Chinese history text presented some recognizable features that distinguished it from all the previous editions in both the Maoist and post-Mao eras. A selected list of editions of history textbooks that are referred to in this section of the chapter includes: Junior Middle School Textbook Chinese History, Book 4, edited by Longgeng Li, People’s Education Press, 1982; Junior Middle School Textbook Chinese History, Book 4, edited by Longgeng Li, People’s Education Press, 1986; Nine-Year Compulsory Education
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In fact, a narrative line seems to have been drawn between atrocities inflicted upon so-called revolutionary Chinese in CCP-led base areas, and those suffered by ordinary Chinese civilians more generic as a category as represented by the Nanking Massacre, sexual slavery and biological and chemical warfare. Unlike the former, the latter tend to be related in a more explicit victimization discourse, perhaps owing to the virtual absence of any narrative construction on these incidents thus far.

For example, in the 1994 edition of Chinese history, it was introduced to students on page 84 that: “In defense of the base areas, our people’s militia force created many unique ways of fighting, including the landmine warfare and the tunnel warfare. The mass people, whether they were men or women, old or young, all went onto the battlefield. The Japanese invaders were totally swallowed up by the vast sea of the people’s war.” Please see Nine-Year Compulsory Education Three-Year Junior Middle School Textbook Chinese History, Book 4, edited by History Room of the People’s Education Press, Beijing: People’s Education Press, 1994.

Military experts have questioned the validity of the tactic of people’s warfare and cast severe doubts over the factuality of the battle scene as depicted in the movie. For more information, please refer to endnote no. 8.

With two of the others being The Landmine Warfare (1962) and The Conquering of the South and Battling in the North [nan zheng bei zhan] (1952), which, together with The Tunnel War, were widely known in China as the “Three War” [san zhan] movies.

Please see the following page of the official blog of CCT military channel: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4d4aa95d0100afzb.html, last accessed on February 6, 2012.

No comprehensive set of data are available regarding how widely stories, reports or narrations about The Tunnel Warfare have been published and circulated in China in printed media for the past decades. But information collected from a variety of sources testifies to the fact that The Tunnel Warfare has been a key component in the textual discourse about the War in the public domain of the country. A most reliable source of information comes from the Chinese textbooks for elementary school students published by the People’s Education Press over the past three decades. A browse through all the major editions shows that except for the 1996 edition, all other editions include a text titled The Tunnel War in Jizhong Area (jizhong was a part of the Jinchaji base area led by CCP during the War) which exposit how revolutionary Chinese people conducted the tunnel warfare under the leadership of the CCP either in book nine or book ten (See, for instance, Full-Time Ten Year School Elementary Textbook Chinese. Book 9, edited by Chinese Edition Team for General Textbooks for Elementary and Middle School, Hubei: People’s Education Press, 1980; Six-Year Elementary School Textbook Chinese, Book 10, edited by Division of Elementary Chinese of the People’s Education Press, People’s Education Press, 1984; Nine-Year Compulsory Education Six-Year Elementary School Textbook Chinese, Book 10, edited by Division of Elementary Chinese of the People’s Education Press, Hebei: People’s Education Press, 2002). Because People’s Education Press is the most authoritative textbook publisher in China that still monopolizes the nationwide market, and because it also publishes the history textbook for junior high school that I have discussed in previous paragraphs and referred to in note number 12, one can reasonably assume that by the time they finish their compulsory education, most Chinese would have been exposed to the knowledge and self-glorifying accounts of the tunnel warfare at least twice, respectively in Chinese and History courses. In addition, a keyword search of “tunnel warfare” on the archive database of People’s Daily shows that the word has been mentioned in 451 articles or reports in the newspaper from 1946 to 2014 (database last accessed on February 14, 2014), with 248 of these appeared after the year 1980. This demonstrates that the tunnel warfare is as relevant and crucial to the public discourse today as it used to be in Maoist era. Furthermore, the National Library of China currently has 26 types of publications available to readers with “the Tunnel Warfare” as or included in the main title, among them a dozen picture-story books for children.

Numerous reports were published on popular entertainment websites introducing how the TV series has triggered a new surge of revolutionary passion among audiences of various regions and different age groups. The famous Tencent Entertainment, for instance, enthusiastically claimed that although recently China’s TV seem to have fallen into the curious quandary wherein one series can never conquer audience in both the Northern and the Southern regions at the same time, the new adaption made a triumphant breakthrough: it was simultaneously screened on nine provincial and regional satellite channels and had won universal approval and appreciation from viewers nationwide (please see the following site: http://ent.qq.com/a/20110329/000153.htm, last accessed on February 14, 2014). The TV series was also found in the top-10 list for TV series rating in Beijing area published on a major website in February.
This ancient Chinese saying originally comes from a story in the Warring States period (please see Wang, S., Complete Translation of Strateiges of the Warring States (Zhan Gao Ce Quan Yi), Guizhou People’s Press, Guizhou, 1992, p. 34). Premier Zhou Enlai, the first premier of PRC, introduced the saying into the political discourse of post-War Sino-Japanese relations on the occasion of the release of the Zhou-Tanaka (referring to the previous Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei) communiqué in September 1972, which marked the normalization of relations between China and Japan.

Another interesting point standing out in this answer is the vigilance of the curator towards the emotional arousal of his audience. This obviously is linked to the state authority’s sustained zeal toward the appeal of internationalism and alertness to the so-called parochial nationalism ever since Mao’s era. But on the other hand, it also arises from a concern for social stability. From the perspective of the authority, all collective emotions, including the indignation and anger that might be directed toward the Japanese military regime during the War, are intrinsically dangerous because they harbor the potential for uncontrollable collective action, which the authority worries about above anything else. This shows that the cultural construction of victim discourse and public remembrance of war atrocities in today’s China also treads a sensitive political and emotional terrain.

Of course we had a huge collection on those! However, we have to be considerate for the emotions of the viewers, after all, the audience is our God. Since everyone knows about this part of the history and what happened during the war, there is no need to arouse people’s sense of indignation or anger. What we want to highlight and focus on is the kind of [invincible] spirit, the kind of soul, the [unconquerable] soul of the nation. We must convey through our exhibition to the viewers a positive and optimistic attitude that always looks forward and aspires to what is good. After all, patriotism, heroism and the value of honor is what we want to indoctrinate into the audience.

Obviously, by pointing out that everyone knows about what happened in history, he showed a deep conviction that history is a self-evident and indisputable body of facts that is intrinsically immune to denial, change or construction and its truth is clear and unambiguous and is one and same with its representation. Not only was he confident that there is only one historical truth and therefore people who are exposed to such truth would naturally understand and believe in it, he also naively and falsely presumed that what the museum is presenting to people is exactly that one truth, a common misperception that most Chinese people have succumbed to. Unfortunately, in the hands of such Party historians and cultural workers rests the power to shape and build public remembrance of the War in today’s China.

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Cacophonous memories


Rui Gao


