Introduction

War, Memory, and Nationalism in China

Some eight decades after its conclusion, the Second World War still grips the imagination of large parts of North America, Europe, and Asia. Tom Brokaw's book *The Greatest Generation* (1998) and Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks's miniseries *Band of Brothers* (2001) captivated American readers and viewers and remain cultural touchstones. British politicians use metaphors about Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain to describe the country's decision to exit from the European Union, and the sitcom *Dad's Army*, gently teasing the wartime Home Guard, still plays on television half a century after it was made. Japanese filmmakers produce movies that explore topics from home-front suffering to the mentality of kamikaze pilots. Courts in Poland adjudicate the legally correct description of death camps built during the Nazi occupation.[1] The Second World War is a long way from being all that these societies think about, of course. But in the United States, Europe east and west, and Japan, there is a continuing undercurrent of collective memory about the importance of the global conflict that does not take too much effort to bring to the surface.

Perhaps more surprisingly, the same is true of China. When outsiders think of collective memory in China, they tend to remember particular historical moments, many of them traumatic—the Cultural Revolution, or the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century. Or, more positively, the legacy of traditional Chinese thought may come to mind. In the past few decades, however, memories of another episode have become ever more prominent in China: the Second World War. Schoolchildren file by the thousands through the Beijing museum that commemorates the War of Resistance against Japan, as the conflict is known in China. Movies about topics from the massacre of Chinese civilians in Japanese-occupied Nanjing to starvation in a wartime famine in Henan top the Chinese box office. Online, netizens debate the finer points of the Battle of Shanghai in 1937, assessing the relative strength of the Chinese and Japanese troops that lined up against one another by the banks of the Huangpu River.

One particular moment in 2015 captured the way the war has entered the Chinese public sphere, with reminders of the past used to make points about the future. On 3 September 2015, Tiananmen Square, at the heart of Beijing, was filled by an enormous parade. Missiles, tanks, and marching soldiers all made their way past thousands of spectators from China and abroad. The event commemorated the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II in Asia. It stood in stark contrast to the elegiac tone of many of the memorials in Europe the preceding spring. On the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in January 1945, as on VE Day the following May, there was a strong sense that the end of a narrative had been reached—veterans and survivors attending a seventieth anniversary in the knowledge that few of them would be there for the eightieth. In China, while veterans stood at the

center of the parade, there was a much stronger sense that the military display was part of a definition of a new China rather than a farewell to the old one.

The Chinese event was distinctive in another important way. The parade was the first national, large-scale public commemoration of China's role in the Second World War. It was a major milestone in a process that had been taking place over a long period of time—some thirty years or more—during which China's attitude toward collective memory of its wartime participation changed significantly, with profound consequences for its domestic and international politics.

I was present in Beijing for the parade. Having spent around twenty years observing and writing about the changing relationship China has with its own wartime history, I found it a fascinating event that confirmed ideas I had been thinking about for some time. While researching a book I published in 2013 on the history of China's World War II experience (titled *Forgotten Ally* in North America, and *China's War with Japan, 1937–1945* elsewhere), I had become increasingly convinced that the war was very far from being long-past history; instead, it remained alive in every aspect of Chinese life, from museums to movies to new media. The generous offer to deliver the Wiles Lectures at Queen's University Belfast in 2014 gave me an opportunity to reflect on why the 1930s and 1940s have erupted back into the political and cultural life of China in the past four decades. I was also able to think about how media portrayed the conflict when I presented a television documentary on the topic titled *WWII: China's Forgotten War.*[2]

This book, which emerged from those reflections and experiences, argues that there is a strong relationship between China's memory of its experience of World War II and its present-day

nationalist identity at home and global role abroad. In territorial disputes and in designing patriotic education, China refers back, again and again, to the war. Contemporary China is shaped by an assertive internationalism in the region and globally, and by an equally assertive nationalism in its domestic politics. Both of these elements are profoundly, if not always obviously, shaped by China's changing understanding of its own history during the Second World War.

China's engagement with other countries has become deeply shaped by ideas about the Second World War—both by the events and purpose of the war, and by its legacy. This is a major shift from how it previously presented itself. During the Cold War, China's primary national narrative came from its self-definition as a communist, revolutionary, anti-imperialist state. In the twenty-first century, much of China's standing and sense of itself has come from its extraordinary economic success. However, this story of growing wealth has little morally weighted content. In part, it has been tarnished by China's lack of compliance with developing norms of international behavior, for instance on human rights, although the country has sought to develop moral ballast elsewhere by entering the World Trade Organization (WTO) and by addressing climate change. China is currently both assertive, as demonstrated by its territorial claims in the East and South China Seas, and internationalist, as shown by its desire both to shape existing international institutions and to create new ones of its own, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (established in 2015). Yet it is keen for its growing presence in the world to be seen as one of normative and moral leadership, rather than leadership defined solely by economic and military weight. One sign of

this has been the almost obsessive concern with developing what Joseph S. Nye Jr. has called "soft power."[3]

The political scientist Rogers Smith has proposed the idea of "ethically constitutive stories" as a way of explaining why particular narratives take hold in a society.[4] China has recently constructed such a story of its own modern genealogy, which presents the country not only as powerful, but as just and moral—with the Second World War as the point of origin.[5] Chinese thinkers now argue that the country was "present at the creation," to use former US secretary of state Dean Acheson's phrase referring to his leading role in the formation of the postwar world. As a result, China, like the United States, should be able to draw on its record as one of the victorious Allied powers to define its own vision of the region. Like the other Allies, China also seeks to legitimize its own behavior and give itself prestige by virtue of its contributions to the wartime victory.

Yet the international aspect of China's engagement with its World War II history should not be separated from the domestic dimension. Memory of the war has also reshaped China's internal political culture. During the Mao era, class identity was central to China's self-definition; under Deng Xiaoping, class distinctions were blurred with the restoration of capitalism. A new form of non-class-based national identity was needed: World War II, with its message of shared anti-Japanese struggle across class lines, proved to be a powerful vehicle for that new nationalism.

The war-based narrative that has emerged during the past four decades is not the only historical narrative that has shaped modern China. For much of the past century, the dominant story was the rise and victory of Chinese communism. Stories about economic

growth, previous instances of historical injustice (the Opium Wars, colonial occupation and extraterritoriality), and the idea of being a "responsible" actor in world society have also had a powerful influence.

Not all historical narratives are equally effective, however. Several scholars have shown that stories of "national humiliation" have been so successful in China because they allow the past experience of invasion and hostility from other powers to be turned into a discourse that demands that China be given greater status and respect. Thus the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century have been used as a powerful trope to indicate China's victim status. But this trope has a drawback: because China was defeated in those wars, they do little to project an image of strength. The warlord conflicts of the 1920s, the Chinese Civil War of the 1940s, and the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s are all poor sources of inspiration for Chinese nationalism. Appeals to traditional Chinese philosophical ideas, drawn from Confucius and other thinkers, help to promote cultural pride but do not help tie China to the formation of the modern world. In contrast, the Second World War provides for China, as it does for the other former Allied belligerent nations, an opportunity to portray the nation as both strong and victorious, as well as morally righteous. As Xi Jinping put it, "The Chinese people's victory in the War of Resistance against Japan was the first complete [*wanquan*] victory in a recent war where China resisted the invasion of a foreign enemy." In those words lies the value of the Second World War for the story of China's rise to global power.[6]

Despite its prominence in recent years, the discourse surrounding the Second World War in China has not yet been

extensively analyzed. This book aims to do just that. It does not cover every aspect of how World War II appears in Chinese public life; more could be said, for example, in areas ranging from the numerous television dramas set during the war years to the contents of school textbooks. But the range of topics addressed here—diplomatic tactics, historiographical arguments, blockbuster movies, online communities, and public museums among them—will show how central war memory has become to reform-era China. As China's ambitions to reshape regional order and cement a nationalist agenda at home come together in the 2010s and 2020s, the memory and legacy of the wartime years will continue to provide an important framework for understanding an often nebulous topic: how today's China constructs ideas of its own nationhood and of its place in the international community.

World War II and China's Place in the International Order

The Chinese government has promoted the new collective memory of World War II as a way to create a morally weighted narrative about China's role in the global order. Much analysis of China's international behavior has focused on whether the country has been following a path that is broadly within the norms of the international order or whether it is behaving like a revisionist power. Scholars such as John Ikenberry and Alastair Iain Johnston have argued that China appears to be trying to incorporate itself within the existing, largely liberal, order while seeking to revise that order to match its own preferences, for instance, on issues such as the United Nations' "responsibility to protect" or the adoption of international trade norms at the WTO. John Mearsheimer and Graham

Allison have suggested a more confrontational possibility, with a rising China seeking to displace American hegemony in Asia.[7]

There is little doubt that China is seeking to exercise regional dominance in Asia, with aspirations to a more global reach.[8] One way it does so is through material, military, and economic means. Another is through discursive tactics. The former approach is more thoroughly covered in the scholarly literature. In economic terms, the period since 2000 has given rise to a narrative of China's rising global economic status.[9] Niall Ferguson's formulation of "Chimerica" expresses the idea that China's purchase of American debt has caused the two states to become intertwined.[10] The global financial crisis of 2007–2008 gave China further economic standing; just when major Western economies were on the brink of a systemic disaster, China's decision to create credit to spend on infrastructure helped to stabilize the global economy as well as to retool its own infrastructure (albeit at the price, a decade later, of a property and credit bubble). In 2013, the formal proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative put forward a bold, multiyear plan to create an integrated trading and commercial zone from Southeast Asia via East Africa and the Middle East to western Europe. This incipient project, along with the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, marked China's intention to become a major economic and financial power, along with moves such as the slow internationalization of the renminbi. The decision by US president Donald J. Trump to withdraw the United States from the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade agreement in 2017 also gave more weight to China's model of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a proposed Asia-Pacific trade agreement, as an alternative. China's economic importance to the region continues to grow. However, it does so in a context where its

economic partners are concerned about the ambitions and unpredictability of China and lack trust in the country.[11]

One reason for that mistrust comes from the rise in China's military spending. Between 2000 and 2019, China increased its military spending from around US$12 billion per year to US$175 billion. The People's Liberation Army has over two million personnel, by any count the largest armed forces in the world.[12] The contradictory signals given by China's foreign policy behavior are exacerbated by the lack of transparency within its decision-making apparatus. This deficiency has also made it difficult for China to project a clearly defined vision of its own foreign policy stance. Rosemary Foot has argued convincingly that missteps by Beijing have prevented it from implementing its foreign policy vision effectively in Asia.[13]

Since 1945, the United States has supported a liberal international order underpinned by a variety of international institutions intended to strengthen military and economic security. The United States has violated the liberal values underlying that order on frequent occasions, most notably in Asia and Latin America, but these same values did become norms that could then be used to criticize such behavior. China, in the 2000s, has felt the need to create an alternative international discourse while not dissociating itself from the benefits of the existing system, which it recognizes has attractions for the international community. Much of China's international discourse is very inwardly focused; that is, it defines China's place in the world to itself, rather than to others. Its outward-facing discourse is for the most part still defined in opposition to the United States: thus, it stresses no interference in the domestic politics of other countries, and no imposition of specific criteria for economic assistance. The ideological arguments

for a greater Chinese role in the region are defined in terms that have little capacity to generate "thick norms," the complex web of laws, assumptions, and habits that embed a hegemon in a region. The thinness of these norms gives rise to fears that China will revert to a more power-driven, realist view of the world when it chooses to. The words of the Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi in 2010 at an Association of Southeast Asian Nations conference in Hanoi stoked this fear. Bursting out in anger, Yang exclaimed, "China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that is a fact."[14]

Even if it might be factually true, Yang's statement that other states were "small" did not begin to provide the sort of moral basis for Chinese hegemony that Beijing sought; instead, it harked back to the aggressive rhetoric which China had frequently condemned the West for using against it. Since the 1980s, however, a new discourse had begun to emerge in Beijing around the issue of the Second World War. One of its aims was to provide evidence to burnish China's claim to ownership of the post-1945 settlement. Another was to deny Japan any significant role in the region. A third was to add moral weight to China's presence in the region and the world.

China's historical revisionism seeks to provide an alternative genealogy for the contemporary order in Asia, rejecting the America-centered "present at the creation" discourse. Although it is inwardly directed, its creators hope to make it better accepted externally in due course. In the best-known version of the creation of postwar order, the United States is at the center and China features at best as an obstacle, and at worst as an irrelevance. According to this story, the United States entered the war after Pearl Harbor in 1941 and directed a strategy that placed Europe first

while providing sufficient support and momentum to prevent the Japanese from consolidating control of Asia.[15] The atomic bombings of Japan brought a swift end to the war in Asia and allowed the United States to occupy Japan alone, in contrast to the kind of multipartite arrangements that marked the division of Germany in spring 1945. The original hopes that China might play a significant role in the postwar Asian order were dashed by the collapse of the Nationalist (Kuomintang / Guomindang) regime on the mainland, which was defeated and replaced by a communist government in 1949. In 1951, the Treaty of San Francisco marked the end of the American occupation of Japan, although the People's Republic of China (PRC) was excluded from signing the treaty (as indeed was the Republic of China on Taiwan).

Postwar order was then formed under two certainties. First, China was isolated from the United States and much of the Western world. Second, the United States and the Soviet Union established friendly or client regimes, with the United States dominant in South Korea, Taiwan, and much of Southeast Asia and Australasia, while Vietnam, North Korea, and China itself remained under communist control. The United States also established a formal security alliance with Japan. In the 1960s, China and the Soviet Union split, allowing the United States further to dominate the region after 1972, when it established links with the PRC. By the end of the European Cold War in 1989–1991, the existing order in Asia was still fixed in grooves that had been set in the years 1945–1952.

The Chinese alternative to this discourse has rarely been articulated as one narrative. However, its contours have become increasingly clear in recent years. In this version, the war in Asia begins not with Pearl Harbor, but with the outbreak of the

Sino-Japanese War in 1937 (or, in the official version as of 2017, with the Manchurian crisis of 1931). China fought without formal allies for four and a half years until 1941, when the United States and the British Empire entered the Asian war. In the last years of the war, and in the immediate postwar, China was given many assurances of future international assistance, an elevated global status, and a role in shaping postwar order in Asia. Yet China was isolated after the 1949 communist revolution, which allowed the United States to dominate the region and shape its structures with little interference from the Soviet Union. By the end of the Cold War, China had been partially reintegrated into the post-1945 order, particularly after it took over the United Nations Security Council permanent seat from the Taiwan government in 1971. But this interpretation of the postwar maintains that to this day, China's role and sacrifices in creating that order are mostly ignored or undervalued. If the United States could gain decades of dominance on the back of its wartime contributions to Asia, Chinese analysts argue today, so should China.

This narrative is related to an idea more frequently heard outside China: that in the early twenty-first century, China is seeking to restore its status as the traditional hegemon in the region. Yang Jiechi's 2010 outburst is a good example of this sentiment. But the way China is reinterpreting the Second World War shows that it is not just a traditional historical role in the *longue durée* that China seeks to regain. Rather, China is engaging in painstaking detail with the existing order so as to re-create it in a recognizable form, but in its own terms—to be "present at the re-creation." Finding a morally based argument has become more necessary in a post–Cold War world where American alliances in the region are based less on coercion than on the active choices of democratic polities

(Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and others among them). Therefore, China has to find an argument that is morally plausible but does not depend on democratic consent.

In case this sounds like an argument for hypocrisy, we should note that this type of revisionism about the origins of the post-1945 world is not merely the product of a Chinese propagandist's mind. Recent scholarly work has seriously questioned the idea that the post-1945 order was entirely created in the rooms of a small number of American and European chancelleries. Eric Helleiner, for instance, has shown that a variety of actors, from Asia and Latin America in particular, were influential in shaping the Bretton Woods settlement at the end of the war.[16]

In order to create a new genealogy of China's international status from 1945, however, China has had to grapple with the awkward reality that the regime that was involved in various aspects of China's postwar settlement, including the Bretton Woods discussions, the establishment of economic and social organizations, and the war crimes trials, was the Nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek, not the Communist government of Mao Zedong. That reality has prompted an unstated, but highly visible, rehabilitation of the Nationalists' wartime role in China. That process of rehabilitation is one of the subjects of this book.

This revisionist approach has real historical substance to it. The country's contribution to the war may not have been as central as some of its boosters now claim, but it has been seriously undervalued in the global historiography of the war. Nevertheless, I do not suggest that China's contributions to the Allied victory give it carte blanche for territorial or legal revisionism in Asia. The current order is indeed underpinned by the legacy of the Second World War—but not solely by it. The advance of democratic norms

and values in the region has been in large part a product of the presence of the United States. One of the great questions raised in the 2010s, and to be answered in the 2020s, is whether the election of Donald Trump, a US president more careless of norms than his predecessor, and the rise of China, an avowedly nonliberal state, will mean that the democratization of Asia proves a more temporary moment than it might have appeared at the start of the century.

Circuits of Memory

China's treatment of its collective memory of the war draws on historical experience and political and social techniques that are in some ways similar to those of other countries, and in other ways profoundly different. This book argues that a very useful concept for understanding how collective memory flows across both time and space is that of *circuits of memory*. This idea is distinct from Henry Rousso's conception of "vectors" of memory, which describes institutions and entities that help transmit memory across time; the circuit transmits memory geographically, across national borders, as well as chronologically. Collective memory of war, or of any historical event, is rarely truly global. During the long postwar, several different circuits have emerged in which certain experiences, understandings, and judgments of the Second World War are shared (such as a core purpose of the war being to fight fascism), but the memories within them are distinct and self-contained. One such circuit exists in northwestern Europe and North America, another in Russia and some of its neighbors, a third in Japan, and a fourth in China. The Chinese circuit of memory has been highly inward-looking until recently; now the

country is seeking to integrate this circuit with other more globally prominent and potent ones.[17]

There has not yet been a full-length study concentrating specifically on China's memory of its wartime experience. The need for such a study has become more compelling in recent years for two reasons. First, China has become much more similar to the other Allied, and indeed Axis, powers in the way that it has brought social memory of the Second World War to the forefront of its construction of national and international identity. But second, paradoxically, China's memory of the war is unique among the Allied powers. The United States remembers it, in Studs Terkels's evocative but ironic phrase, as "the good war," when GIs liberated Europe and Asia. The United Kingdom remembers it as a time when Britons resisted bombing and invasion and stood tall against the Nazis, with the war against Japan generally sidelined. The Soviet Union refers to it as the Great Patriotic War, and Putin's Russia has considered making it a crime to demean the Soviet war record. France has converted its story of occupation into one of resistance.[18]

China is the major Allied belligerent whose position on the meaning of the war has shifted most thoroughly during the postwar era. For the first half of the Cold War, under Mao Zedong, official China spoke in a minor key about the war years, and when it did, it concentrated on the record of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the importance of the war in bringing the party to power. Only limited acknowledgment was made of the contribution of Nationalist forces.[19] From the 1980s onward, the war became a more central part of official discourse, appearing everywhere from textbooks to museums to television soap operas. During this process, the scope of China's understanding of the war

expanded significantly, the most notable example being the way in which the Communists' old opponents, the Nationalists, were brought back into the narrative of the war. Many of the tropes that have become central to contemporary Chinese understandings of World War II date from the 1980s or later—the Nanjing Massacre, the bombings of Chongqing, and the disputes over the meaning of the Potsdam and Cairo declarations among them.[20]

The topic of memory has become a mainstay of historical analysis in recent decades, especially memory relating to wars. Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and Paul Fussell are among those who laid the groundwork for what has become an immense field.[21] The Second World War, in particular, has generated a large body of scholarship on the links between memory and the politics of the postwar. Even more than the First World War, the Second has also given rise to a considerable body of scholarship that relates memory of the war itself to the experience of mass violence, and analysis of the Holocaust has become central to that particular field.[22] Assessing the ways in which memory of war has shaped postwar Europe, Jan-Werner Müller notes that "memory and power can only be fully understood if domestic and international, social scientific, historical and ethical perspectives are brought together."[23] That insight, that no one perspective is sufficient to explain the significance of memory in shaping a society, is one that informs this book.

Much of the early work on war memory, on the part of both perpetrators and victims, was centered on the Western world, but a number of studies have also focused on Japan. Carol Gluck, Ian Buruma, Franziska Seraphim, and Yoshikuni Igarashi, among others, have shown that remembering (and forgetting) Japan's period as a wartime power has profoundly shaped the country's

postwar culture, to the extent that the term *sengo* (postwar) became a core part of the country's self-definition during the Cold War.[24] The memory of other wars in non-Western countries has slowly become part of the scholarship on how memory is shaped, as Viet Thanh Nguyen demonstrates in his analysis of parallel discourses in Vietnam and the United States about the war between those two countries.[25] However, the analysis of trans-Asian memory of the Second World War is still a work in progress, with China especially underexamined.

Another area that needs further analysis has to do with identifying the common factors that mark war memory in nonliberal states. The majority of the scholarship on memory of the Second World War has been either on liberal states (the United States and Britain), or states that liberalized after the war (Japan, Germany). The most thorough analysis of a nonliberal wartime belligerent that *remained* nonliberal after the war has been that of the Soviet Union, and post-1991, Russia. The concept of the Great Patriotic War was central to postwar Soviet identity. Although a more nuanced discussion of the war was allowed in some parts of the public sphere, the vast majority of the discourse about it was controlled by the state, at least until the short period of *glasnost* (openness) under Mikhail Gorbachev. The factors that shaped the development of war memory in the Soviet Union and communist Eastern Europe also influence the Chinese discourse on the war today, which is partly free and partly constrained.

The Second World War has entered Chinese life again, and shows no signs of being dislodged. The desire to woo Taiwan into reunification, the disappearance of the Cold War motivations for downplaying Japanese war atrocities and stressing Nationalist ones, and the increasing delegitimation of Marxism all contributed to a

significant change in official boundaries for discussion of the war. The most obvious and perhaps startling public manifestation of this shift was the much more positive tone taken toward the role of the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek in contributing to the victory against Japan, a victory that had previously been attributed almost entirely to the CCP. This reorientation could be seen in media such as textbooks, popular films, and museums. The conflict between Nationalists and Communists, endlessly recalled during the Mao era, did not disappear from historical discussion, but it began to take second place to a narrative that stressed Communist and Nationalist unity in the face of Japanese atrocities and aggression. At the same time, Japanese war crimes, especially the 1937–1938 Nanjing Massacre (widely known as the Rape of Nanking), and the representation of China as a victim of bloody Japanese aggression, became increasingly prominent. Traumatic events such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the latter much discussed in public in the 1970s and 1980s, gave way to talk of China's theater of the world war as a time of clear moral contrasts, in which noble Chinese patriots, both Communist and Nationalist, fought against Japanese devils.[26]

Although it did so particularly visibly, China is not alone in having changed its overall narrative of the war's significance during the postwar decades. Britain and France entered the war because their guarantee to Poland had been called in. The Soviet Union and the United States did not enter until attacked by Germany and Japan, respectively. Other justifications—whether saving the world for democracy or preventing the destruction of Europe's Jewish community—were only formulated later. During the ambiguities and uncertainties of the postwar, the Allied powers nostalgically reinvented the Second World War as a bomb-strewn age of gold.

The United Kingdom, in Dean Acheson's phrase, "lost an empire and failed to find a role"; the United States became entwined in Vietnam and the protests of the 1960s; and the Soviet Union became a sullen Cold War giant keeping Eastern Europeans captive with tanks, concrete, and barbed wire. For these troubled societies, the Battle of Britain, Midway, and Stalingrad provided powerful justification for what they had become. China, of all the Allied powers, had perhaps the most problematic relationship with its past because of its swift move from the Sino-Japanese War to the Chinese Civil War, during which former allies became wartime enemies. Unlike Russia's conflict with Germany, China's war against Japan was never able to provide a fount of universally resonant cultural memory.[27]

To be sure, China was not the only country that had a difficult relationship with the postwar legacy of wartime alliances. Greece, like China, plunged into a civil war between 1946 and 1949. In the Greek case, it was the anticommunist forces that won, but the unhealed fissure of that era led to highly polarized politics, a military coup in 1967, and resentments that festered for decades and are not wholly erased even now. Nonetheless, China is unique as a major belligerent Ally that had no time to absorb the shock of the war against the Axis before the conflict turned inward.

If China's civil war makes it unique among the Allied powers in one respect, its history of collaboration has some similarities with France's experience. Like France, China was both an Allied belligerent and (under a rival regime) a collaborator with the Axis. This aspect of French history has been one of the most powerful subfields of war memory. Henry Rousso's now classic *The Vichy Syndrome* (1987) suggested that there was a complex argument within France throughout the Cold War about how to remember

its role in the war: the country wished to portray itself as a force for resistance, but in fact it was largely controlled by collaborators. There is a parallel with the case of China. During the war, as Hans van de Ven has pointed out, "China was at war not just with Japan but also with itself."[28] In the early years of the conflict, China put up more resistance to the Axis than did France. But between 1937 and 1945, a set of collaborationist governments was established in much of central and eastern China. Unlike in France, this aspect of the war is very little discussed in China today; while there is a certain amount of debate about how much continuity of structures or legacy there was between the era of Chiang Kai-shek and the Mao period, there is almost no discussion about any similar continuity between the era of the collaborationist leader Wang Jingwei and his postwar successors.

Despite hidden stories of collaboration, and complexities beneath the heroic narratives, the Sino-Japanese War has the advantage of not being the fault of the Chinese themselves—unlike the many other wars that China endured in the twentieth century. The civil wars of the Republican era, particularly virulent in the 1910s and 1920s, culminating in the final Nationalist-Communist confrontation of 1946–1949; the massive upheavals of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, along with the constant mass mobilization that underpinned class warfare in the People's Republic—in all of these cases, Chinese were in conflict with other Chinese. Imperialism has been the only force that provides a seemingly uncomplicated pole of aggression and hostility, contrasted with which the Chinese can be seen as blameless; and the Sino-Japanese War is both the most recent and the most devastating example of that imperialism. World War II sits in collective

memory in China as being more similar to past wars against foreign aggression, such as the Opium Wars, rather than being considered alongside World War I, as collective memory in Europe has tended to do.[29] Yet overall, the renewed interest in World War II in China merely shows China "normalizing" its experience of that conflict; it is joining an increasingly globalized discussion of the war's significance that grows stronger the further we move away from the event itself.

Sino-Japanese Relations

It may seem obvious that today's tense relationship between China and Japan is shaped by the collective memory of the conflict between them in the mid-twentieth century. Yet the connection is not straightforward. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, relations between China and Japan have fluctuated. The period from 2001 to 2005 saw a relatively passive Chinese president (Hu Jintao) and a revisionist Japanese premier (Koizumi Junichirō) generate heightened tensions. The brief first succession of Shinzo Abe to the premiership (2006–2007), despite his reputation as a "China hawk," lowered the temperature. Then, during the rule of the Democratic Party of Japan (2009–2012), Japan's attempts to warm relations with China were rebuffed. Those years saw the start of a period of tension between the two countries, including serious disputes over the Diaoyu / Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea in 2010 and 2012, which were still rumbling in early 2013, shortly after Xi Jinping's accession to power. By 2017, when both Xi and Abe had secured a further term of power, tensions once again dipped when the two sides agreed to establish a hotline to

prevent clashes in the East China Sea, and Japanese and Chinese leaders have continued to hold regular, low-key meetings in subsequent years.

Yet at some level, the dispute between these two countries is not best understood as a conflict between China and Japan. Rather, it stems from a continuing debate within China about the nature of Chinese identity. While the dynamics of day-to-day, or even year-by-year, negotiations between China and Japan will go up and down, they are not for the most part relevant to the deeper discursive and ideological issues that collective memory of World War II has created within China. The areas concerning relations with Japan, while important, are instrumental and temporary; what is more, they are capable of being addressed within the context of ordinary diplomacy. Much of China's new stress on war memory is tied to dynamics that have very little to do with Japan, particularly the reality of Japan as it is today. In fact, opinion polls show that many Chinese, especially elites, have respect for certain aspects of Japanese society.[30]

This is also the reason that many of the gestures that observers and external bodies suggest for bringing about Sino-Japanese reconciliation, whether further apologies from Japan or the writing of joint textbooks, are unlikely to bring about a final resolution to the issue.[31] These are rationalist responses to what is an emotional and ideological phenomenon. They are based on the assumption that specific actions would alter a variety of elements that are deeply embedded within Chinese identity, one of which is the sense that it is safer to examine, argue about, and mourn what happened during the Second World War than to face up to the internal conflicts that have wracked China since then. China is not so much

in conflict with the Japanese as with itself, over issues that include economic inequality and ethnic tensions.

The book begins with a brief account of what happened in China during World War II. I suggest that it was order, rather than the furtherance of democracy and freedom, that was the primary goal of all the main Chinese participants. The first chapter then goes on to review the Cold War years and the changing nature of the discourse about World War II in international and domestic politics. In the first, short phase of the postwar period, Nationalist China was able to draw on its wartime record to redefine its position in international society, shifting its status from a partly colonized power to a major, if weak, sovereign actor. But that strand of postwar discourse was associated with the Nationalists and did not survive their collapse on the mainland. From 1949 on, Mao's China was determined to separate itself from most of the Nationalist record, and as a result, during the Cold War, discussion of the conflict against Japan was restricted mostly to the Communist contributions to a "people's war" of anti-Japanese resistance.

The next four chapters deal with post–Cold War China's turn toward a new embrace of the memory of the war. The academic world in China, discussed in Chapter 2, was one of the first sectors to take advantage of the relatively nondoctrinaire view of research encouraged by paramount leader Deng Xiaoping and the reformists he appointed, including Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, as well as the new stress on nationalist discourse encouraged by figures such as the ideologically conservative Hu Qiaomu. One aspect of the new openness was a willingness to encourage research on a variety of previously forbidden areas of historical study,

including the Nationalist war effort. I will examine the ways in which different aspects of the wartime period have been explored as part of China's changing historiography, including the role of the Nationalists and Communists, China's international alliances, collaboration with the Japanese, and crucially, the formation of the post-1945 order and China's role within that order.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I turn to public sites of memory within China in the 1990s. Since the 1980s, China has developed several strands of public remembering of the war years, a process reflected in a variety of institutions and entities that transmit collective memory, including museums, television programs and films, public art, and popular writing. These entities, in which the war against Japan is used as a foundation myth for a new vision of Chinese identity, have been highly influential in the shaping of contemporary Chinese nationalism.

Looking at public sites of war memory since the turn of the millennium, we see that much of the attention has moved from books to film and social media, with the latter providing a space for unofficial voices to comment on the contemporary significance of the conflict's legacy. Whether it is television host Cui Yongyuan discussing the fate of Chinese war veterans, or anonymous rebels swapping views on battle tactics online, the idea of the war and the postwar continues to be relevant even in cyberspace.

We then move, in Chapter 5, from the discourse dominated by Beijing to a more local exploration of wartime identity: the case of Chongqing. This city in southwest China was the temporary wartime capital of China from 1937 to 1946, where the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek led the war effort in exile. In the past quarter century, Chongqing has developed its own identity in part by resurrecting the history of the wartime period. Chongqing's

celebration of the Nationalist war effort has entered into unstated competition with the Beijing-centered discourse. I also examine other local stories that have recently been brought to light, including fuller accounts of Communist headquarters at Yan'an, and memories of the 1942 famine in Henan.

Chapter 6 turns from the domestic to the international, exploring the ways in which China has been using aspects of the Second World War to bolster its standing and claims in international society, particularly as it relates to regional order in East Asia. A revival of interest in topics such as the Cairo Conference of 1943 has fueled attempts to reassess the process that led to the post-1945 order. These ideas have shaped not only direct negotiating tactics, but also the discourse within which China presents itself to the wider world.

Ever since 1945, Britain has used a variety of tropes relating to World War II to shape its national identity. This was especially true during the debates leading up to and following the Brexit decision of June 2016.[32] World War II metaphors served as a substitute for those who felt that Britain's identity needed to be reshaped but could not define an attractive vision to counter the cosmopolitan, pro-European definition of the United Kingdom.

Unlike Britain, China is not suffering from status anxiety. Yet its ideological cupboard is relatively bare. It is still having a hard time defining its economic and security vision as anything other than an increasingly authoritarian not-America. Looking to the past is problematic because so many events cannot be discussed. Chinese president Xi Jinping's proscription against "historical nihilism" points to a new desire to close off discussion of sensitive issues such as the Cultural Revolution. It is also still immensely

difficult to talk in a full and frank way about figures such as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.

The Second World War, on the other hand, provides a useful episode to look back to. It provides China with the opportunity to present itself, both at home and abroad, as being a victim of circumstances outside its control (invasion by a hostile power), but also as having been able to resist those circumstances and having contributed to international security (the global antifascist alliance). China has been attempting to re-create an identity it was forging in the 1930s and 1940s, as a rising power that took a cooperative and powerful role at a time of immense global crisis, as a key wartime ally. In doing so, it has also created a subtle corollary: the idea that China is also a postwar state. This is "postwar" in the sense of a period that defined countries by their experience of war, whether as Ally or Axis, and most crucially, by what they made of the aftermath. Today, as China rediscovers its wartime history, we can expect to hear a great deal more about the war itself and the "Chinese postwar."

To understand that postwar, we need to appreciate the significance of the war itself. To the West, the term "Sino-Japanese War" captures the period from 1937 to 1945, with the term "China-Burma-India Theater" used after Pearl Harbor. For the Chinese, the conflict has, since the very beginning of the war, been called the "War of Resistance against Japan." We turn now to the war itself and how the Chinese saw it, to lay the groundwork for examining how and why it has come back to haunt the very different China of today.