

PRESENTISM AND CHINA'S CHANGING WARTIME PAST*

‘War is like a mirror. Looking at it helps us better appreciate the value of peace . . . We must learn the lessons of history and dedicate ourselves to peace’.¹ These unexceptionable words were spoken by the Chinese president Xi Jinping on 3 September 2015. There was a certain ironic quality to them, however, since the speech took place as part of a major display of military discipline and technology at the parade commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War in China. Media attention was focused on the twelve thousand troops who marched in Tiananmen Square, and on the absence of leaders in attendance from any of the major Allied nations, other than Vladimir Putin of Russia. However, one wider development reflected in the parade received relatively little attention: the major changes in China’s attitude towards the Second World War itself, from the late Cold War era to the early twenty-first century. For at the centre of the parade were eight elderly veterans of the war against Japan, four of them from the Communist armies and four from the Nationalist (Guomindang) forces. Just a couple of decades earlier, it would have been unthinkable for Mao Zedong’s old Nationalist enemies to have been placed in such a position of honour within a major state ceremony.

In a curious, mostly unstated interaction between the Communist Party, the academy and the public sphere, China has profoundly changed its understanding of its recent past and its attitudes towards present-day concerns that have emerged from that past. China’s sense of its own historical trajectory has changed significantly in the past two or three decades. Prior

* I am grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for a Leadership Award which provided funding that underpinned the research in this piece.

¹ Xi Jinping, ‘Address at the Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War’, *China Daily*, 3 Sept. 2015, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015victoryanniv/2015-09/03/content_21783362.htm> (accessed 12 Oct. 2016).

to the 1980s, it was largely based on the idea of a revolutionary rupture that took place in 1949, and which marked the division, in the historiographical conventions in the People's Republic of China, between 'modern' history (*jindai*) and 'contemporary' history (*xiandai*). In recent years, however, there has been a shift towards an understanding of the recent past as part of a trajectory of continuity, rather than change, in interpreting the recent past.

The term 'presentism' has a variety of applications, but in this piece I shall adapt the analysis made by S. A. Smith in his article within this forum, making reference to Hartog's idea of a 'regime of historicity', of a 'sense that only the present exists', to propose a specific argument with regard to one topic: the historical analysis of China's experience during the Second World War. In the high Cold War era, the topic of China's wartime experience was taken by many American historians to be part of a continuum that informed a wider debate on the US presence in Asia. In the post-Cold War era, the same topic has been taken up by Chinese historians as a means of creating a new continuum between a wartime past and a politically turbulent present by elision of the revolutionary past. If, in Hartog's terms, the present is all that exists, the present 'regime of historicity' in China creates that present in part by a deliberate removal of some parts of the past which suggest difference rather than similarity with the present.²

The historiography of China's involvement in the Second World War is inexorably connected to the Cold War, and the 'presentism' of its historiographical development starts not in China itself but in the American academy. The field of modern Chinese history after the Second World War was, essentially, reinvented in the United States, as was that of Japanese history. Europe did, of course, produce many fine scholars of modern China, but the subject became relatively marginal within the academy in the United Kingdom, France and

² For a discussion of this phenomenon in the historiography of the Chinese revolution of 1911, see Rana Mitter, '1911: The Unanchored Chinese Revolution', *China Quarterly*, ccviii (Dec. 2011).

West Germany. For the British, there was no very compelling contemporary reason to concentrate on China; Britain's last major Asian commitment was to Malaya, which became independent in 1957, and by the 1970s, politicians had essentially acknowledged that Britain would withdraw from commitments 'east of Suez', with Hong Kong left as an anomaly. India had, of course, become independent in 1947, yet the study of the subcontinent remained more central to British academic life. However, unlike with India, the British connection with China had always been partial; nor did the Cold War freezing of links allow much continuing traffic between China and the United Kingdom, unlike the continuing Commonwealth links with South Asia.³ Perhaps more importantly, the study of China provided few analogies or metaphors for the crises of Suez, the decline of the pound, or the final dismantling of empire in Africa. For these reasons, among others, there was always a more assured place for Indian history than Chinese in British universities.

For the United States, however, the Cold War made Chinese history, at least in the nation's research seminars and college classrooms, a powerful analogy for American policy in Asia, which could be drawn on by academics making an argument that linked the recent past to the present. The publication in 1962 of Chalmers Johnson's *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power* was a major turning point.⁴ It remains to this day one of the few works on Chinese history that has had a major influence outside its own field (with its thesis that Communist Chinese ability to inspire nationalism among the peasantry during the war against Japan allowed the Chinese Communist Party to rise to power), but in the early 1960s, its power came in part from its ability to mark an end to a McCarthyite taboo: that the success of

³ See Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism, 1900–49* (Manchester, 1999).

⁴ Chalmers A. Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937–1945* (Stanford, 1962).

the Chinese Communist Party must be attributed purely to geopolitical forces, or to subversion within the United States, and not to any inherent qualities of the movement itself.⁵ However, the heightening of the Vietnam War in the mid 1960s led many in the American academy to become increasingly critical of the trajectory of US policy in Asia. In this context, Mark Selden's monograph *The Yen'an Way in Revolutionary China* (1971), {another P&P style is not to use years adjectivally where it's possible to avoid, so I've left it in parentheses here} which analysed the social basis of the Communist revolution in the Shaanxi–Gansu–Ningxia base area controlled by Mao, had a major impact. Selden agreed with Johnson that it was necessary to take account of indigenous factors shaping the Chinese revolution, but argued instead that it was social policies, not nationalism, that was of primary importance to the peasantry.⁶ An analogy with the Vietnam War ran behind much of this debate, which projected the events of the Second World War, some three decades before, onto the then current war in South-East Asia. The sight of South-East Asian countries being bombed to support the 'domino theory' of communism provoked academics who wished to demonstrate that indigenous factors, not geopolitical ones, were better explanations for revolutionary change. The debate on the peasant revolution in China in the American academy would remain lively for another decade and a half.⁷ However, the market reforms pioneered by Deng Xiaoping after 1978 made the question 'why did the Chinese peasant revolution succeed?' rather less relevant to understanding what was then present-day China.

⁵ Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past*, 2nd paperback edn (New York, 1984).

⁶ Mark Selden, *The Yen'an Way in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971).

⁷ Suzanne Pepper, 'The Political Odyssey of an Intellectual Construct: Peasant Nationalism and the Study of China's Revolutionary History: A Review Essay', *Journal of Asian Studies*, lxiii, 1 (2004).

It was notable that studies of the Chinese Communist revolution in the West became distinctly fewer in number from the mid 1980s.

Since the Cold War, it has been harder to discern such obvious specific correlations between historiographical frameworks for the reading of modern Chinese history and the academic concerns of historians, but such links were nonetheless visible for those who cared to see them. This period, from the 1990s onwards, has been notable for a major change in the dynamics of the historiography of China. Prior to the 1990s, relatively little scholarship from within the Chinese academy had a major impact on the Western field of Chinese history, whereas from that period onwards, the interaction between the two was profound, not least because of the increasing contacts between the participants in the field across national boundaries. This set of contacts led to the confluence of Chinese and Western interest in certain topics. If Hartog argues that presentism is the ‘sense that only the present exists’, then some version of this transformation is visible in a growing trend for Western and Chinese historians to seek out continuity, rather than change, as the interpretative framework of modern Chinese history. Rather than making the rupture of a revolutionary moment in the mid-century the central turning point, there has been a move to suggest a longer, more undifferentiated continuity in the trajectory towards a still hazily defined modernity.

For instance, one of the most obvious results of the market reforms in China was the re-emergence of Shanghai as China’s great commercial point of contact between China and the outside world. This in turn stimulated significant new research on the nature of China’s colonial modernity, to the extent that it became a problematic much discussed in the field by the 2000s that Shanghai was being made to stand in for all of China.⁸ Yet the parallels with

⁸ See, for instance, Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, ‘Locating Old Shanghai: Having Fits About Where It Fits’, in Joseph W. Esherick (ed.), *Remaking the Chinese City: Modernity and National Identity, 1900–1950* (Honolulu, 2000).

the present were clear, and along with it, aspects of the new historiographical approach, which sought to link recent history with the present, while eliding the revolutionary moment of 1949. As today, in the 1930s Shanghai was a city in some way apart from the rest of China, while connected to it; its culture drew on a cosmopolitan, globalized set of influences that made it a marker of modernity; and it played a central economic role in manufacturing and finance. The differences with the 1930s were stark too, the most obvious being that Shanghai was a city with a foreign-run International Settlement and French Concession, whereas it was very firmly within the People's Republic by the 1990s. Yet the 1990s was a time when China was seeking to reconnect to the outside world, and the concentration on a more urban and cosmopolitan history was part of that change.⁹ Research interests in the Chinese academy, as well as the West, reflected that interest, which was shaped in part by very practical issues, such as the new openness of Shanghai's archives, which rapidly became known as the most open and accessible historical institution in China.¹⁰

The connections between political imperatives and historiographical change also had their effect on Chinese readings of the history of the Second World War. In the mid 1980s a high-level decision was taken to allow a wider interpretation of China's history during the Second World War.¹¹ Previously, the major officially permitted interpretation had been of China as engaged in a 'people's war' under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, a

⁹ See, for instance, the essays on a major Shanghai-connected figure in the political and financial worlds in Wu Jingping, *Song Ziwen shengping yu ziliao wenxian* [Research on the Life and Materials of T. V. Soong] (Shanghai, 2010).

¹⁰ Unfortunately, by the mid 2010s access to Shanghai's Municipal Archives had become much more restricted, leading to a lessening of scholarly engagement with the materials, particularly by overseas scholars.

¹¹ Anthony David Brooks, 'Angry States: Mainland Chinese Views of Japan since 1949' (Univ. of Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, 2013).

discourse that concentrated largely on the endogenous sources of resistance to the Japanese in China's rural areas. By the early twenty-first century, this had given way to a stress on the 'world anti-fascist war', with China as a member of a global alliance with an international role.¹² As a result, the previously taboo subject of the significant Nationalist wartime contribution to the victory over Japan was now rehabilitated in mainland Chinese historiography, bringing it closer to the norms of Taiwan, where a pro-Nationalist history had, of course, been mainstream for many decades.

This changed the emphasis of scholarship, as well as the wider impact of that changing historiography. In particular, it created a new sense of continuity between the recent past and the present day by implying a continuum between the actions of the Nationalist government in the period up to 1949 and those of the Communist government in the early twenty-first century. For instance, in late 2013 historians and policy makers alike in China became fixated on the anniversary of one particular event: the Cairo Conference held on 22–6 November 1943, at which three Allied leaders, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Chiang Kai-shek, made plans for the shape of post-war Asia. The meeting was an important one; the placing of a non-European leader at such a conference made it clear that the global war was a genuinely anti-imperialist one, although many of the strategic decisions made at the time were reversed soon afterwards.¹³ However, the events at Cairo had not generally attracted major historical interest in China, until the seventieth anniversary of the conference in 2013.

¹² For instance, Hu Dekun *et al.*, *Zhongguo kangzhan yu shijie fan-Faxisi zhanzheng* [China's War of Resistance to Japan and the World Anti-Fascist War] (Beijing, 2005). {unable to check ref. Please confirm there are more than 3 authors, or otherwise name them. Thank you} {I presume this is a collection of modern essays by Hu Dekun *et al.*, not edited by them?} [I will check this again – HAVE DONE SO – it is just Hu Dekun as author and no *et al.*]

¹³ Hans J. van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China, 1925–1945* (London, 2003), 38–47.

The reason for the sudden flurry of attention was the Cairo Declaration, the statement issued in 1943 by the three Powers as a summary of their intentions. The statement made various claims of **varying [instead of various]** specificity about Allied intentions for the disposal of Japanese imperial territories after the war:

<ext>It is their purpose that Japan shall be stripped of all the islands in the Pacific which she has seized or occupied since the beginning of the First World War in 1914, and that all the territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese, such as Manchuria, Formosa, and The Pescadores, shall be restored to the Republic of China. Japan will also be expelled from all other territories which she has taken by violence and greed. The aforesaid Three Great Powers, mindful of the enslavement of the people of Korea, are determined that in due course Korea shall become free and independent.¹⁴</ext>

In the 2010s this declaration suddenly developed a new significance, as it became relevant to increasingly urgent geopolitical claims by China in the East and South China **Seas [?not seas]**. This became a particular issue in 2012–13, when a long-running dispute between China and Japan over the sovereignty of the Senkaku (or Diaoyu) Islands in the East China Sea threatened to expand into conflict. The islands had been taken over by Japan at the end of the 1894–5 war, and were then placed under American protection in 1945. In 1972 they reverted to Japanese sovereignty, after which point both China and Taiwan have claimed the islands as their own territory.¹⁵

The creation of a past continuous with the present, that necessarily elided the revolution, can be seen in the increasingly high-profile treatment of the Cairo Declaration of

¹⁴ ‘Cairo Communiqué’, 1 Dec. 1943, National Diet Library, Tokyo, <http://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/shiryo/01/002_46shoshi.html> (accessed 12 Oct. 2016).

¹⁵ On changing regional order in East Asia, see Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (Oxford, 2013).

1943. The academic historiography of this event has grown significantly in recent years on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.¹⁶ The historical analysis went hand in hand with a new emphasis in the Chinese media. In 2013 Chinese media used the Cairo Declaration very explicitly as a means of staking a claim to the islands: the nationalist tabloid the *Global Times* carried a commentary from China's official Xinhua News Agency declaring that 'As the world is commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Cairo Declaration Sunday, it is high time that Japan observed the terms dictated by the historic document'.¹⁷ The piece goes on to make it clear that China's claim on the Senkaku/Diaoyu {I haven't left '(or Diaoyu)' again – see previous para – need to put both to avoid claims of political bias} Islands remains relevant in the present day. {new para? YES}

A more comic variation of the politicized history of the Cairo Conference occurred in 2015, when the film *Cairo Declaration (Kailuo xuanyan)* was released in China. A heroic war epic, it attracted merciless mockery from commentators on the Chinese internet when its poster featured the faces of Stalin, Roosevelt, Churchill and Mao. Neither Stalin nor Mao had attended the conference; Chiang, who had, was nowhere to be seen on the advertisement. Although historically inaccurate, the poster was a clear case of the film-makers adapting history to very specific present-day ends, in this case, a version of history that they thought might accord with the Chinese Communist Party's revisionist agenda with regard to the Cairo Conference's significance for territorial sovereignty.¹⁸ Yet it reflected some of the contours

¹⁶ See, for instance, Wu Sihua, Lu Fangshang and Lin Yongle (eds.), *Kailuo xuanyan de yiyi yu yingxiang* [The Significance and Impact of the Cairo Declaration] (Taipei, 2014).

¹⁷ 'Commentary: Japan Ought to Honor Terms Dictated by Cairo Declaration', *Global Times*, 1 Dec. 2013, <<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/829006.shtml>> (accessed 12 Oct. 2016).

¹⁸ On the poster controversy, see Ryan Kilpatrick, "'Cairo Declaration" Film Posters Inspire Ridicule Online amid Allegations of Rewriting History', *Hong Kong Free Press*, 17 Aug. 2015,

of the ‘presentism’ surrounding the Chinese interpretation of the Second World War, since it violated the idea of an endless ‘present’. By restoring an element of the elided revolutionary past in the shape of Mao Zedong, the film poster was an exception that breached the rule, exposing the skill with which the new historiography has managed to blur or remove mention of China’s revolutionary history in its self-presentation.

The disputes over the contested islands also explain why one of the most important trends in contemporary historiography of China is legal history (and the history of the politics of law). The new interest in the historical origins of China’s post-war territorial claims has drawn attention to China’s contributions to the post-war international legal environment, such as the role of the Chinese judge Mei Ruao at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in 1946–8. Mei was appointed by the Nationalist government, and historians have never rated his legal standing particularly highly. However, in recent years scholars in the mainland have rescued sections of his diaries, which were damaged during the Cultural Revolution, and have published a variety of materials relating to the Chinese role at the trial.¹⁹ The portrayal of Mei as a serious legal scholar who made sterling attempts to bolster China’s position in the immediate post-war period fits in with the contemporary Chinese emphasis on the preceding government’s having set the ground for China’s status as a major international power, rather than being merely a discredited regime that was destroyed by *its [rather than their]*

<<https://www.hongkongfp.com/2015/08/17/cairo-declaration-film-posters-inspire-ridicule-online-amid-allegations-of-rewriting-history>> (accessed 12 Oct. 2016).

¹⁹ Barak Kushner notes that Mei Ruao’s diaries were mostly destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, but that some of his entries recording his impressions of Tokyo survive: *Dongjing shenpan: yuandong guoji junfating Zhongguo faguan Mei Ruao riji* [Tokyo Trial: The Diaries of Mei Ruao, Chinese Judge at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East], ed. Mei Xiaobao (Jiangxi, 2005), cited in Barak Kushner, *Men to Devils, Devils to Men: Japanese War Crimes and Chinese Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015).

Communist rivals. As with the Cairo Conference, revisionism on Mei Ruao has stretched beyond academic scholarship to the world of cinema; in 2006 he was portrayed by the movie star Damian Lau in a film entitled *Tokyo Trial (Dongjing shenpan)*, directed by Gao Qunshu.

In 2015, the year of the seventieth anniversary of the end of the war, there was an even stronger attempt to create a continuous link between historical events and current Chinese political concerns. In the summer of that year two major conferences on the war were held at prominent scholarly institutions on either side of the Taiwan Strait on the topic of the War of Resistance against Japan (*kang-Ri zhanzheng*). At the Guoshiguan (Academia Historica) in Taiwan, one area of emphasis was the role of the Nationalist armies around the world, with an address by President Ma Ying-jeou that stressed the way in which the Chinese, but in particular the Nationalist, contribution had been underplayed in global histories of the conflict.²⁰ A significant quantity of new scholarship, including a **four [not six]-volume** history of China's war against Japan, was published and made available for the conference.²¹ In contrast, the opening session for the conference held by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing stressed the 'leading role of the Chinese Communist Party' in the war. These two interpretations of the two major Chinese parties' roles during the war were heavily influenced by contemporary political claims. The Nationalist Party of the

²⁰ 'Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou Remembers Nationalist Victory in Sino-Japan War', *Straits Times*, 4 July 2015, <<http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/taiwans-president-ma-ying-jeou-remembers-nationalist-victory-in-sino-japan-war>> (accessed 12 Oct. 2016).

²¹ **Guoshiguan (Academia Historica) (ed.), *Kang-Ri zhanzheng lishi* [History of the War of Resistance against Japan], 6 vols. (Taipei, 2015).** **[unable to check ref.] [I think Guoshiguan... is the publisher here? We wouldn't give that as the editor if so. Please confirm] [Yes, it is the publisher but also given as a "collective" editor for the collection too. BUT I WILL CHECK.]**
[have checked. Correct version is: Lu Fangshang, ed., *Zhanzheng de lishi yu jiyi* [History and memory of war], 4 vols. (Taipei, 2015).]

early twenty-first century is a very different party from its 1930s predecessor, now pluralist and explicitly apologetic for the human rights abuses committed by the regime during its dictatorship on Taiwan. Nonetheless, it draws significant legitimacy from its origins as a party that aims to unite Chinese across both sides of the strait. During 2014–15 the party suffered significant political setbacks. The local elections of late 2014 showed gains for the opposition Democratic People's Party; the 'Sunflower' movement occupied parliament in protest at the government's attempts to develop closer links with China; and very low opinion poll ratings were recorded for President Ma Ying-jeou. In this context, Ma in particular chose to emphasize the party's historical role as leading China during the war against Japan as a means of adding some historical gloss to the Nationalists' increasingly tarnished reputation.

Meanwhile, in the People's Republic of China, the previously unitary message that the Communists were the only actors of significance in winning the war was altered significantly. Following the Tiananmen Square parade, the military theorist Luo Yuan of the Academy of Military Sciences of the People's Liberation Army, who holds the rank of rear-admiral, declared on television that he would rather avoid the sterile arguments about whether the Communists or Nationalists contributed more to the ultimate victory over Japan, and speak instead of a war of 'national' resistance.²² Beyond public displays and the media, the academy has also been given more space for substantial and empirically fruitful new work to be published in China. There has been a rich array of works that cast significant new light on a variety of wartime phenomena, from economic planning to the effects of bacteriological

²² Interview with Luo Yuan by R. L. Kuhn, 'Closer to China', CCTV.com, 6 Sept. 2015, <<http://english.cntv.cn/2015/09/06/VIDE1441521121701390.shtml>> (accessed 12 Oct. 2016).

warfare.²³ Nonetheless, much of the historiographical expansion has created a sense of continuity between the 1940s and the present; that is, that historical sacrifices established in the earlier era still have a moral claim today, as opposed to the dismissal of the pre-1949 era as a separate and irrelevant period for the post-revolutionary phase — in other words, a ‘presentist’ claim for historical continuity.

The new stress on the past as part of a historical continuity with the present in Chinese historiography of the war is in strong contrast to the lack of any such sense in the Western world. There has been a significant revisionist movement in the anglophone academy in terms of assessing China’s wartime role.²⁴ However, there has been little translation of that revisionism into the Western public sphere because the analogies do not fit comfortably. China’s case is that it was treated badly during the Second World War and now deserves to be taken seriously on its various claims in the region. Western observers may be sympathetic to the correction of the historical record, but this does not imply any sort of sympathy for the contemporary claims that China makes in the East and South China seas, even if they are given backing by the selective use of historical examples.²⁵ Fifty years ago, most of the

²³ The best source for new research in this field is probably the journal *Kang-Ri zhanzheng yanjiu* (Research on the War of Resistance against Japan), published quarterly by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences since 1991.

²⁴ See, for instance, Mark Peattie, Edward Drea and Hans van de Ven (eds.), *The Battle for China: Essays on the Military History of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–1945* (Stanford, 2011). On social history, see Rana Mitter and Helen M. Schneider (eds.), *Relief and Reconstruction in Wartime China*, special issue, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, xi, 2 (2012).

²⁵ Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven, 2014); Permanent Court of Arbitration, ‘The South China Sea Arbitration: *The Republic of the Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China*’, press release, 12 July 2016, <<https://pca-cpa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/175/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Press-Release-No-11-English.pdf>> (accessed 12 Oct. 2016).

presentist obsession with wartime China was to be found in the United States, with little attention paid to it in China itself. Today the situation is nearly reversed. As memories of the Second World War in Asia fade in Western minds, in China there is an ever greater sense that academic and popular history are coming together to create a sense of an endless present between the events of the 1940s and those taking place in Asia today.

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