

popular term for the Holocaust. Chinese know about Hitler's death camps, of course, but there is no one word in Chinese for the most searing 20th century event in the Western Hemisphere.

China's Story

That China should be wholly focused on its own experience rather than region-wide concerns is easy to understand. Aspects of China's war narrative are contested and evolving. Chinese historians debate, for example, the relative burdens borne by Chiang Kai Shek's Nationalist Army, which did most of the fighting, winning, and losing, and the Communist Party's Eighth Route Army, a force that conducted guerilla actions under the Nationalist flag. In recent years, China's Communist Party historians have been increasingly willing to admit that Chiang fought to defend the Motherland—a welcome concession after four decades of giving all the credit to Mao Zedong and Zhu De.

What is *not* contested though, in Beijing or Taipei, is that for 14 years, the last five of which overlap with what Westerners call the War in the Pacific, China was the victim of a brutal Japanese invasion and that the War Against Japan was the horrific culmination of nearly a century in which China was repeatedly defeated, humiliated, and exploited by Japan, European powers, Russia, and the United States. This historic trauma—an incurable ego wound for one of the world's great civilizations—ended when Japan surrendered on the deck of the USS Missouri. Bataan, Midway, and Okinawa don't enter into it. It is China's story.

Even when China celebrates the end of the war in an international context, it rejects international phraseology. On September 3, 2015, Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping held a military parade on Tiananmen Square to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of

the war. Representatives from over fifty countries and several international organizations attended. What they were asked to celebrate, however, was not the end of World War II, but 纪念中国人民抗日战争暨世界反法西斯战争胜利—The Victories of the Chinese People in the War to Oppose Japan and the World Anti-Fascist War. China paid for the party, so China got to name it.

The World War II and War in the Pacific rubrics do not offend Chinese sensibilities and China's non-use of those terms is not intended to challenge Western conceptions of the period. The Western phrases as a framework are not fraught in the way that, say, China's claim to have *liberated* Tibet when it *invaded* in 1950 is fraught. In discussions of the Second World War, the differing usages of terminology lead to rich, thoughtful comparisons of experience and historiography, while an American who tells Chinese friends that Tibet's liberation was an invasion should be ready for a fight.

Another surefire way to start a historical argument is to question the PRC's frequent and lurid invocations of Japan's treatment of China fifty-plus years after the war ended. In 1993, I watched *Schindler's List* with three Chinese artists—all Anselm Kiefer aficionados—in an American shopping mall. They were moved by the film, but in the bar room debrief that followed, they didn't linger long on the plight of European Jews. They wanted to know when China would finally produce masterful films on its most devastating 20th century trial. I assumed they meant the Cultural Revolution, and I said that Xie Jin's *Hibiscus Village* was a masterpiece. Blank stares. Over the next three hours they explained that China's signature 20th century tragedy was not the Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward, or the Civil War, but the Japanese Invasion. This, they said, was China's great spiritual wound. I said



that seemed odd because there was no moral ambiguity in the War Against Japan; the Japanese were the wholly culpable invaders and the Chinese the wholly innocent victims. Didn't the tragedy end with the bad guys defeat?

Remembering the War Against Japan

The popularity of China's cultural reflections on the war with Japan over the past 27 years has proven that my artist friends—no fans of the Communist Party—were right. China has produced over a thousand graphic films and TV shows—over 70 in 2012 alone—in which Japanese soldiers do unspeakable things to Chinese and Chinese wreak unspeakable vengeance. The genre is banned or diluted from time to time, but it keeps coming back. And it's not just the big and small screen. In 2014, Beijing approved two new holidays to commemorate the invasion: *Victory Day of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression* on September 3, and a *Rape of Nanking* day on December 13.

State-of-the-art museums and memorials to China's wartime experience have also proliferated. The Flying Tigers Museum in Kunming; the Stilwell Museum in China's wartime capital, Chongqing; and an overgrown monument to American fliers who died defending China in Nanjing all pay tribute to the Sino-American alliance. But the theme of American sacrifice is a distant third to Japanese evil and Chinese courage, as it should be.

The message of most Chinese war museums is straightforward: *the Japanese did this to us and it must never be done again*. Fair enough. The Nanjing Massacre Memorial, which has been expanded and updated several times but predates the recent building frenzy, puts the need for places of public memory beyond dispute. So does the Unit 731 Museum in Harbin, near the

Russian border, where hundreds of thousands of Chinese were subjected to vivisections, chemical and biological weapons experiments, and other nightmares. These atrocities, and countless others in Chinese cities Americans have never heard of, have long been familiar to Chinese schoolchildren.

But the museum building continues. In 2005, on the 60th anniversary of the conclusion of the War in the Pacific, China completed the Dianmian Anti-Japan War Museum. Located in very rural Tengchong County, Yunnan Province, the spacious, high-tech galleries take a deep dive on Chinese and American joint efforts to build and defend the Burma Road, while also dedicating a few dioramas to Japanese atrocities. Ninety minutes south, just above China's border with Myanmar, tourists who can't get enough of this stuff can visit the lavish *Memorial Hall for Nanyang Overseas Chinese Mechanics Returning Home to Join the War of Resistance Against Japan*, which opened in the summer of 2017. This one may strike non-Chinese as a stretch. It's noble that Southeast Asian mechanics of Chinese ancestry returned to China to fix trunks and tanks, but the phenomenon is celebrated on a Smithsonian scale. Like the Tengchong museum to its north, the *Overseas Chinese Mechanics* museum was practically empty on the day I visited. The only people in the building were our American delegation, our Chinese hosts, and a few custodians buffing the floors.

Disparate and Divergent Lessons

Unfortunately, I've lost touch with my Chinese artist friends. If they read the preceding paragraphs, they would doubtless say that China doesn't care a whit what I or any foreigner thinks about its museums and that it's none of our business. And they'd be right.



Most Americans—and some Chinese—with whom I’ve discussed the issue believe that, while China’s anger against Japan is genuine and deserved, the Chinese Communist Party stokes that anger with movies, TV series, holidays, and museums to increase the Chinese people’s support for the Party, which presumably saved them from Japan in 1945 and stands ready to do so again today. When I ask Chinese friends if they really think it possible that Japan would invade or threaten China *now*, most say: *Yes, if they could*. I’ve been having this conversation for 33 years, and still find China’s claim that Japan is a present danger unintelligible. Then again, it’s been 155 years and the United States still hasn’t recovered from the Civil War. We’re going to adjudicate it once again in November, while the world looks on in bafflement.

On the 75th anniversary of the end of the War in the Pacific, what matters is not the words we use to describe the conflict or how we memorialize it, but how lessons drawn from the conflagration shape our interactions today.

For China, the War Against Japan is primarily a story of China’s victimization. For the United States, it is a tale of American triumph.

From these disparate lessons, each nation has distilled a national savior complex that continues to inform its foreign policy. America’s mission is to save the world; China’s is to save itself *from* the world. As China’s wealth and military strength have grown, it has come to believe that saving itself requires extracting resources, developing markets, and shaping institutions worldwide. This vision involves other countries, but it isn’t about them. It’s about China.

In response to China’s unsurprising ambitions and growing capabilities, the United States has come

to believe that its role as world savior requires it to save the world *from* the Chinese Communist Party.

In broad terms, that is why the two superpowers are contemplating a new cold war. Their mutual distrust is rooted in mythologies established when they were allies.

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