

2021-22 WILSON CHINA FELLOWSHIP

# From Regional to National: Northeastern Scholars and the National Discourse on the War of Resistance against Japan

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## Abstract

In January of 2017, the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s Ministry of Education made an unprecedented announcement to alter the timeline of the War of Resistance against Japan (China's experience of World War II) from eight to fourteen years. This was the culmination of a decades-long "date debate," spearheaded since the 1980s by scholars from Northeastern China who vehemently argued that the war timeline should start with the invasion of their homeland on September 18, 1931 (as opposed to the previously accepted start date of July 7, 1937). Thus, Chinese historians from a region that is often seen as "far-flung" due to its geographic location and "backward" due to its reputation as China's rust belt provided the impetus to a significant policy shift in the upper echelons of the Beijing government. Changing the starting date of the war was not only advantageous in promoting the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s resistance effort domestically, but also in further emphasizing China's role on the global stage in World War II, despite the fact that an eight-year war timeline is more historically accurate. We must simultaneously recognize the CCP's attempts to rewrite the history of the war while also taking seriously China's role in World War II, albeit under the Nationalists and not the Communists.

## Implications and Key Takeaways

- U.S. policymakers must not consider the PRC to be an authoritarian monolith—there are a variety of regional interests that can have strong bearings on the formation of top-level policies, such as the Northeast's role in the "date debate" that led to the 2017 Ministry of Education announcement to change the war timeline. Thus, U.S. policymakers should focus on building relationships with those in positions of regional authority in China in addition to the central Beijing leadership.
- U.S. policymakers must take seriously the relevance of the legacy of Mao Zedong and Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought to Party historiography, particularly under Xi Jinping. Building on Mao's legacy is an important part of CCP legitimacy today and how the Party portrays itself to domestic and international audiences.

- U.S. policymakers must recognize the CCP's attempts to rewrite history for nationalistic purposes and work with historians to promote the objective study of Chinese history. This should include convening international symposiums and actively countering the Chinese government's recent coercion against certain academic journals.
- U.S. policymakers should see China's emphasis on its role in World War II, in which it claims it fought the fascists for far longer than any other belligerent, as part of intentionally building an international image of a moral, responsible actor. This has direct geopolitical implications, as China seeks to reframe its aggressive actions in the South China Sea and elsewhere.

## Introduction

“The War of Resistance against Japan developed along a torturous road. This war started in 1931.”

– Mao Zedong, 1937

“The Mukden Incident became the starting point of the Chinese people’s War of Resistance against Japan and revealed the prologue of the global Anti-Fascist War.”

– Xi Jinping, 2015

On January 3, 2017, the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s Ministry of Education made an unprecedented announcement regarding the War of Resistance against Japan (抗日战争), which is China’s experience of World War II. Starting with middle school textbooks printed in spring 2017, the starting date for the War of Resistance would be changed from July 7, 1937, or the Marco Polo Bridge Incident (卢沟桥事变), to September 18, 1931, or the Mukden Incident (九一八事变), an extension of the war’s timeline from eight to fourteen years.<sup>1</sup> However, before 2017, the 14-year timeline was anything but a foregone conclusion. On the contrary, there had been a fierce “date debate” since the 1980s regarding the proper timeline for the Resistance against Japan. This “date debate” was largely spearheaded by scholars from Northeastern China (东北), who vehemently argued that the war timeline should be expanded starting with the invasion of their homeland. By 2017, however, this “date debate” had largely shut down due to the CCP’s decision to officially weigh in.

The War of Resistance against Japan has served an increasingly important role in Chinese political consciousness in the last few decades and has become ever more intertwined with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s legitimizing narrative. Under Xi Jinping, the PRC continues to highlight the War of Resistance against Japan for reasons connected to both domestic and international political legitimacy. Highlighting fourteen instead of eight years of resistance not only emphasizes that the CCP (as opposed to the Nationalists) was the cornerstone (中流砥柱) of the war, but also seeks to convince the international community of China’s leading role in World War II, which is commonly known in China as the Anti-Fascist War (反法西斯战争).

This paper first summarizes the Marco Polo Bridge Incident and the Mukden Incident, as the history of these events is essential to better comprehend the “date debate” that followed decades later. It then charts the historiography of the “date debate” in the Chinese scholarly world, analyzes the credibility of both dates, and finally looks at the implications of this “date debate” and why it is important for us to understand.

## **I. The Marco Polo Bridge Incident and the Mukden Incident**

The Marco Polo Bridge Incident of July 7, 1937 is still regarded in the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan as the official start of the war,<sup>2</sup> and in the PRC as the start of “national all-out war” (全国性战争) between China and Japan.<sup>3</sup> The events of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident were not particularly unusual in and of themselves; rather, their significance lies in the powder keg of latent aggression they ignited.<sup>4</sup> What exactly happened that fateful day in Wanping, a small fortress town to the southwest of Beijing, is still a mystery. The chain of events began, however, after Japanese troops from the Eighth Company under Colonel Mutaguchi Renya marched to their designated training grounds near Marco Polo Bridge on July 7.<sup>5</sup> Allegedly, the Eighth Company had heard gunshots from within Wanping and subsequently requested permission to enter the town to search for a missing private. The following morning, after having been refused, the Eighth Company and reinforcements began their military assault on the town, which they captured within a matter of hours. Such local skirmishes were not uncommon, and the local Chinese and Japanese troops had reached a compromise by July 11.<sup>6</sup> However, the national governments in Nanjing and Tokyo had become involved and the fires of war had been stoked, hence the subsequent significance of July 7, 1937 as the start of “national all-out war.”

Juxtaposed with the Marco Polo Bridge Incident is the Mukden Incident, which is now viewed in the PRC as both the starting date of the “partial war” (局部抗战) and the official starting date of the War of Resistance against Japan.<sup>7</sup> The Mukden Incident (or the Manchurian Incident) was set off in Shenyang (Mukden) by the Japanese Kwantung Army due to a variety of factors, including concern over the potential effect of growing Chinese nationalism in the region

on Japanese commercial and political interests. On the evening of September 18, 1931, junior officers Ishiwara Kanji and Itagaki Seishirō and the garrison under their command in Shenyang exploded a bomb on the railway tracks outside of the city.<sup>8</sup> Claiming that the bomb was intentionally set off by Chinese nationalists to derail a Japanese train, the Kwantung Army utilized this incident as a pretext to invade Manchuria.<sup>9</sup> Largely due to Chiang Kai-shek's policy of non-resistance, the Kwantung Army was able to establish control over the majority of Manchuria in a matter of months without much bloodshed. In March of 1932, it established the puppet-state of Manchukuo with Henry Puyi, the last emperor of the Qing Dynasty, as the head.

## II. The "Date Debate"

As prominent China scholar Rana Mitter has noted, "the writing of history and the practice of politics have always been closely intertwined in China."<sup>10</sup> Thus, the "date debate" over the proper starting date of the War of Resistance against Japan should not be viewed as separate from developments in CCP politics, but rather closely linked.

Before the 1980s, the War of Resistance against Japan's start date remained largely uncontested, and both the Chinese scholarly community and popular opinion habitually used the phrase "eight-year war" starting with the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1937. However, starting in the 1980s, a number of scholars, many of whom hailed from the Northeast, began to push for a "fourteen-year war" starting with the Mukden Incident of 1931. After this line of thought gained traction, what was once implicitly accepted as fact became open to debate. Starting in the 1990s, scholars advocating for the "eight-year war" started to notably and directly engage with the "fourteen-year war" scholars. Interestingly, the CCP allowed this "date debate" to continue unabated for several decades until the official Ministry of Education pronouncement in 2017.

### The 1980s

The widely cited initiation of the "date debate" is a 1983 statement by Liaoning University professor Zhang Deliang, who argued at the Northeastern Military

Fourteen-Year History of Resistance to Japan Academic Seminar (东北军十四年抗战史国际学术研讨会) that the War of Resistance started on September 18, 1931. Zhang contended that the first shot of resistance fired by the Chinese was by the northern base of the 7th Brigade of the Northeastern Army.<sup>11</sup>

A year later, Yan'an University professor He Ying argued that "taking the Marco Polo Bridge Incident to be the starting point of the War of Resistance against Japan is inappropriate, does not accord with reality, and is unscientific."<sup>12</sup> First, this was because the Mukden Incident changed the principal contradiction (主要矛盾) in Chinese society according to Marxist dialectics from domestic class struggle to one between the Chinese people and Japanese imperialism. He also utilized Mao Zedong's legacy, quoting a 1937 speech in which Mao referred to the Mukden Incident as the start of the "War of Resistance against Japan era" (抗日时期). Lastly, He argued that after the Mukden Incident, the CCP and Nationalist patriots really began to struggle against Japan.<sup>13</sup>

Another Northeastern scholar, Jian Ming, also utilized Mao's legacy to justify a fourteen-year war. Jian quoted a phrase from a 1937 speech of Mao that would continue to be quoted time and time again by scholars arguing for a fourteen-year war: "The War of Resistance against Japan developed along a torturous road. This war started in 1931."<sup>14</sup> He quoted the Tanaka Memorial to show that the Mukden Incident represented the first step in Japan's master plan: "If we [the Japanese] want to conquer China, we must first conquer Manchuria and Mongolia; if we want to conquer the world, we must first conquer China."<sup>15</sup> Although the authenticity of the Tanaka Memorial is not accepted by most international scholars today, it is still widely utilized in China as evidence of the scope of Japanese military ambitions in the 1930s.<sup>16</sup> Jian further discussed the extensive resistance of the Chinese people after 1931 and argued that before 1937, it was the CCP, not the Nationalists (or Guomindang, GMD) that was the true leader of the war effort and the true representative of the Chinese people.<sup>17</sup> However, Jian did acknowledge that there were some GMD patriots who joined in the resistance, which dovetailed with the shift in CCP scholarship on the War of Resistance to acknowledge the GMD role in the war. Lastly, Jian argued that the Mukden Incident should not only be the start of the War of Resistance, but that it should also be considered the opening salvo of the global Anti-Fascist War.<sup>18</sup>

## The 1990s

As mentioned above, Chinese historians began to debate each other in earnest concerning the proper starting date of the War of Resistance in the 1990s. Certain scholars, particularly from China's Northeast, continued to clamor for the Mukden Incident as the proper starting date. Other scholars, in contrast, proposed a wide slate of differing interpretations of when the appropriate starting dates should be for the War of Resistance against Japan, the Anti-Fascist War, and World War II.

Scholars clamoring for the Mukden Incident starting date utilized similar arguments to the authors from the 1980s. In 1990, Northeastern scholar Guang Deming argued that the principal contradiction in Chinese society changed in 1931 rather than in 1937, although he distinguished between the "partial war of resistance" and the "all-out war of resistance."<sup>19</sup> In 1999, Northeastern scholar Wang Xiuying argued that 1931 was the proper starting date for both the War of Resistance against Japan and World War II. Similar to Jian Ming, Wang viewed the Mukden Incident as the first step in Japan's master plan to conquer China.<sup>20</sup> In addition, Wang juxtaposed the CCP's resistance of the Japanese from the start with the GMD's policy of non-resistance under Chiang Kai-shek. Interestingly, to back up her arguments, Wang not only quoted Mao and Zhou Enlai, but also relied on the scholarship of several prominent Japanese historians who argued for a 15-year war starting in 1931.<sup>21</sup>

Besides the Mukden Incident and the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, Chinese historians mentioned several other proposed starting dates for the War of Resistance against Japan, including the December 9th Movement, which was a student demonstration in 1935 under the leadership of the CCP calling for resistance to Japan; the Xi'an Incident of 1936, which led to the Second United Front between the CCP and the GMD to jointly resist Japan; and the August 13th Incident, which marked the beginning of the Battle of Shanghai in 1937. Nanjing historian Song Li even argued for the starting date of August 14, 1937, when the GMD produced its "Statement of Resisting Japan in Self-Defense" (自卫抗战声明书).<sup>22</sup>

Besides Wang Xiuying's argument that the War of Resistance and World War II should start with the Mukden Incident, Chinese historians in the 1990s had a variety of other opinions on when World War II and the Anti-



Fascist War should start. Shaanxi historian Lei Xinshi argued that the start of World War II should be the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937, rather than Germany's invasion of Poland. Lei argued against using the Mukden Incident of 1931 as a starting point of World War II because, he argued, Japan was not yet allied with the Axis Powers in 1931, and the Chinese people were not able to fully resist Japan until 1937.<sup>23</sup> Hubei scholar Pan Xiangsheng argued that World War II and the Anti-Fascist War should not be conflated—World War II should start with Germany's invasion of Poland, but the global Anti-Fascist War should start with the Marco Polo Bridge Incident.<sup>24</sup> Wang Guilin, in contrast, believed that Germany's invasion of Poland was still the appropriate starting date for World War II.<sup>25</sup>

## 2000 to 2017

By the 2000s, many historians, both from the Northeast and other parts of China, were clamoring for the start of the War of Resistance against Japan to be the Mukden Incident of 1931. Although there were still proponents of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1937 as the starting date, these proponents started to fall into the minority. After 2015, a speech made by Xi Jinping to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II really solidified the 14-year war position, and after this the “date debate” largely went silent. This does not mean that there were no more scholarly articles; rather, the articles all tended to agree with each other, unlike the contentious debate of the 1980s through 2000s, due to Xi and the CCP's endorsement of the September 18, 1931 start date. Xi noted that “the Mukden Incident became the starting point of the Chinese people's War of Resistance against Japan and revealed the prologue of the global Anti-Fascist War.”<sup>26</sup> This would become the official position of the CCP just two years later, in 2017.

In the early 2000s, however, the “date debate” was still going strong, although more scholars, notably from Northeastern China, were vociferously calling for 1931 as a starting date. Interestingly, Heilongjiang scholar Zhao Junqing argued that the starting date of the War of Resistance should not be September 18, 1931, but rather November 4, 1931 with GMD general Ma Zhanshan's Battle of Jiangqiao, when Zhao claimed that the Chinese people really started resisting Japan. Zhao's rationale for a 1931 starting date followed

those set out by previous scholars: the principal contradiction in Chinese society changed; the CCP resisted Japan while the Nanjing government pursued a policy of nonresistance; this was in line with Mao Zedong thought; and that the sacrifices of the Northeasterners must be recognized.<sup>27</sup>

In 2005, several more scholars argued for the Mukden Incident to be the starting date. Shenyang Normal University's Wang Guizhong argued that starting the War of Resistance from the Marco Polo Bridge Incident would serve to negate the sacrifices of the Northeasterners in resisting Japan.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Yue Siping argued that taking September 18, 1931 as the starting date for the War of Resistance was most scientific, but that the start of World War II should be the Marco Polo Bridge Incident.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, in 2006, famous Jiangxi historian Liu Tinghua (who had written earlier articles on the topic as well) argued that the start of both the War of Resistance *and* World War II should be the Mukden Incident because the principal contradiction in Chinese society changed. Additionally, Liu contended that scholars should not equate the start of the war with when the GMD was resisting, as the CCP had resisted the Japanese since 1931.<sup>30</sup>

On the other side of the debate, historians pushed for 1937 to be the proper starting date. Zhang Zhenkun stated in 2006 that after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the war started and went way beyond any other invasion experienced in modern Chinese history in both its scale and death. He suggested that the idea of the 14-year war was unduly influenced by Japanese scholarship, and utilized a slippery-slope argument—if the war can be 14 instead of 8 years, what would stop it from becoming a 51-year war, starting with First Sino-Japanese War in 1894? Zhang argued that there was no unified resistance between 1931 and 1937—it was very sporadic. Furthermore, before the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, there was still the possibility of compromise between the Nanjing and Tokyo governments. Lastly, Zhang thoroughly debunked the idea that Japan's plan to colonize China began in 1931—for that, he contended, one would have to go back to the 21 Demands of 1915.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, in 2010, Zeng Jingzhong vehemently argued against the proponents of the 1931 starting date—Zeng also stated that there was little real resistance to Japan after the Mukden Incident.<sup>32</sup>

Another potential starting point proposed by scholar Huang Aijun was in 1928, when warlord Zhang Xueliang declared allegiance to the Nanjing

government and raised the GMD flag in Northeastern China. This, according to Huang, signaled Zhang's resistance against Japanese influence in the Northeast. In contrast, Huang also believed that there was little resistance to Japan after 1931. He distinguished between the War of Resistance against Japan, which should start in 1928, from the historical period of the War of Resistance (抗日时期), which he argued should begin with the Xi'an Incident of 1936.<sup>33</sup>

As the 2000s turned into the 2010s, scholarship defending the Marco Polo Bridge Incident as the starting date of the war began to wane. In 2010, a history professor at Changchun's Northeastern Normal University, Cheng Shuwei, argued once more that the principal contradiction in Chinese society changed on September 18, 1931 to that between China and Japan. To deny that the Mukden Incident was the start of the war would be to deny the sacrifices of the Northeasterners before 1937. As part of this, Cheng distinguished between the "partial War of Resistance," which took place between 1931 and 1937, and the "all-out War of Resistance," but argued that the War of Resistance against Japan should include this "partial War of Resistance."<sup>34</sup> In 2015, Li Hailin and Liu Yong'an utilized the language of Xi Jinping to state that "the total victory in the War of Resistance against Japan is the beginning of the rejuvenation of the Chinese people" (抗日战争胜利是中华民族复兴的历史起点). Li and Liu presented similar arguments, that after 1931 the CCP resisted Japan and called for an end to the civil war, unlike the GMD. The CCP was the true mainstay in the War of Resistance against Japan. Furthermore, Li and Liu emphasized how the beginning of the War of Resistance against Japan was also the beginning of the global Anti-Fascist War.<sup>35</sup>

### III. Implications of the "Date Debate"

There are several implications of the "date debate" that are important to consider. First, it is notable that so many scholars advocating for the Mukden Incident as a starting date for the war have been from Northeastern China. Second, many scholars heavily relied on Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought to make their claims. Third, the increasing emphasis of China's role in World War II indicates that China cares about projecting an image

of a responsible, moral actor in the international community. Fourth, it is clear that due to reasons related to both domestic and international politics, the CCP is actively engaging in rewriting the history of the War of Resistance against Japan.

## **The Influence of the Northeast**

Manchuria, or Northeastern China, has a rich, multifaceted history in which multiple nationalities vied for land, resources, and identity. Once the homeland of the Manchus, Manchuria was cordoned off from the rest of China under the rule of the ethnically Manchu Qing dynasty, and immigration of Han Chinese was forbidden. As the Qing Dynasty's power weakened in the late 19th century, however, many Chinese flouted this prohibition and immigrated to the Northeast. By the late 19th century, Russia and Japan both had strong vested interests in the region, and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 was largely fought on Manchurian soil. Japan's investment in the region, particularly through the South Manchurian Railroad (SMR, or Mantetsu), grew in the first few decades of the 20th century, culminating in the Mukden Incident and the establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo.

After the surrender of Japan in 1945, much of the Chinese Civil War was fought in Manchuria for several reasons: the CCP had its bases in Northern China; the majority of Japanese troops with their equipment were in Northeastern China waiting to surrender; and the Japanese had built up the infrastructure of the region considerably. After the formation of the PRC in 1949, the Soviet Union further invested in the region, sending thousands of technical experts to the region to help develop it. Thus, Manchuria became a bastion of heavy industrial development in the Mao era, and was economically ahead of much of the rest of the country.

However, Manchuria had several major setbacks in the Cultural Revolution and beyond. During the Cultural Revolution, many "sent-down youth" ended up in the "Great Barren North" and were inculcated with an attitude of conquering nature. This led to a depletion of many of Manchuria's rich natural resources, most notably massive deforestation. After Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening Up" policy and China's gradual transition to a market economy, Manchuria with its mass of behemoth State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) was

slow to adapt. Today, many SOEs in the Northeast have been either shut down or have greatly reduced capacities, and Manchuria is widely considered akin to the American “rust belt”—a region that was once economically prosperous but is now struggling to keep pace. It is a region that, in the words of many Chinese, can be considered both “遥远,” or far-flung, and “落后,” or falling behind.<sup>36</sup>

And yet, as the “date debate” and its resolution show, Northeastern scholars had a major influence on pushing for the fourteen-year war timeline from the 1980s through the 2010s. Scholars such as Zhang Deliang, Jian Ming, Wang Xiuying, Zhao Junqing, Wang Guizhong, and Cheng Shuwei vigorously pushed the starting date of September 18, 1931 to include the sacrifices of their regional compatriots. Indeed, it is the case that political pressure from the Northeast was one of the deciding factors in changing the timeline in 2017.<sup>37</sup>

The key role played by Northeastern scholars in the 2017 Ministry of Education announcement suggests that far from being a top-down, authoritarian monolith, the PRC is deeply impacted by regional interests when it makes policy decisions, even by regions such as the Northeast that popular opinion might not consider to be as influential. This adds a layer of complexity to existing scholarship on China’s historical memory, which too often focuses on a top-down historical narrative that is dictated by sociopolitical vicissitudes from Beijing.<sup>38</sup> It also contributes to global scholarship on how national narratives are constructed. For example, through studying the hybrid relations between local and national in the *Heimat* (homeland) ideal that took root of the German unification of 1871, Alon Confino shows that more localized narratives can indeed influence the establishment and evolution of a national narrative.<sup>39</sup> The case of Northeastern scholars in China shows that this is the case in the non-Western world as well. Accordingly, U.S. policymakers should seek to build relationships with those in positions of regional authority in the PRC in addition to Beijing policymakers, as the former may exert considerable influence on national policymaking.

## **Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought**

By the end of the Cultural Revolution, the narrative of Marxist class struggle was largely discredited, leading to a “profound feeling of ideological

malaise.<sup>40</sup> Particularly after the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the CCP needed a new legitimizing narrative, which it largely found through the vehicle of nationalism. In particular, the Century of Humiliation, which culminated with the War of Resistance against Japan, became a core component of patriotic education. What is noteworthy, then, is that even after the supposed debunking of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, these same theoretical underpinnings were frequently utilized by Chinese historians during the “date debate” from the 1980s through 2010s. Both Marxist dialectics and the writings of Mao Zedong appeared often in these scholarly articles.

Scholars described the principal contradictions in society according to Marxist dialectics in depth. The idea of the “principal contradiction” is an important theoretical contribution of Mao Zedong Thought to Marxist dialectics that formed a central component of the scholarly “date debate.”<sup>41</sup> For example, as mentioned previously, He Ying went into great detail concerning the principal contradictions in Chinese society before and after September 18, 1931. Before the Mukden Incident, according to He, the principal contradictions in Chinese society had been those of imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism. With the Mukden Incident, however, the contradictions of domestic class struggle within China decreased, as China was faced with the threat of national extinction. The principal contradiction in society, then, shifted to one between the Chinese people and Japanese imperialism.<sup>42</sup> Many scholars opined that Mao’s writings also justified a 14-year war; as previously noted, Jian Ming utilized a famous quote of Mao’s from 1937. Similar arguments were also made by Jian Ming, Liu Tinghua, Guang Deming, Zhao Junqing, and Cheng Shuwei.

The utilization of Marxist dialectics and the writings of Mao to justify the change to a fourteen-year war (although scholars arguing for an eight-year war also utilized Mao) is noteworthy because it shows that in the scholarly community, the legacy of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought continued to be crucial to the legitimacy of the CCP. This was the case even before Xi Jinping, who is arguably the most powerful leader since Mao<sup>43</sup> and who has promoted the study of Marxism more than his predecessors, notably Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin. Furthermore, the direct utilization of Mao’s writings by scholars to “prove” the correct start date of the War of Resistance against

Japan serves as a notable exception to the view of international Mao scholars such as Timothy Cheek that “Mao is often not used at all in intellectual debate and discussion of public issues.”<sup>44</sup> U.S. policymakers should not underestimate the influence of Mao Zedong Thought as a crucial component in how the CCP legitimizes itself to both domestic and international audiences.

## China’s International Image

China was an Allied Power in World War II, along with the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. Yet in the West, China’s wartime contributions have too often been overlooked, largely due to Cold War politics that saw mainland China quickly shift from ally to foe.<sup>45</sup> This is despite the fact that a number of well-known Western military veterans have relayed their stories to the public of deployment to China.<sup>46</sup> The PRC and its historians are well aware of this lack of knowledge in the West about China’s wartime role, and are seeking to remedy it for the purposes of both domestic and international politics.

As far back as 1987, Liu Tinghua stated in no uncertain terms that “the Chinese people used armed struggle to oppose the Japanese fascist’s military invasion [of the Northeast] and fired the first shot of the global Anti-Fascist War!”<sup>47</sup> Other Chinese historians and politicians, most recently Xi Jinping, have made similar arguments. In a speech to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in 2015, Xi noted that China’s victory in the war “has reestablished China’s status as a major country in the world. The Chinese people have won the respect of the peace-loving people of the world, and the Chinese nation has won a lofty national reputation.”<sup>48</sup> Xi’s emphasis on China’s role in the war on the international stage shows how China is increasingly utilizing its new collective memory of the War of Resistance to “create a morally weighted narrative about China’s role in the global order.”<sup>49</sup> The PRC’s message to the international community, then, is that based on historical precedent, as China increases its presence on the world stage, it should not be feared but rather embraced as a responsible and conscientious actor.

China’s present push to project its World War II image onto current geopolitics can be understood in tandem with continued efforts to expand its global influence. Whether it be through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

or China's increasing involvement in Africa and Latin America, China has an invested interest in portraying its rise as peaceful rather than threatening. This is largely to assuage the international community's fears that China seeks ultimate hegemony in the global great power competition. In expanding the war timeline from 8 to 14 years and arguing that this represents not only the start of the War of Resistance against Japan, but also of World War II and the global Anti-Fascist War, China is suggesting that it is an inherently moral actor, seeking to uphold the international system, based on historical precedent. U.S. policymakers should be wary of China's attempts to present itself as a historical moral actor on the international level in order to reframe its aggressive actions in areas such as the South China Sea.

## Rewriting History

Of course, changing China's international image also involves a conscientious rewriting of history, in which it was the CCP, rather than the GMD, that contributed the lion's share of the war effort. In shifting the war timeline, it is apparent that the CCP is engaged in an intentional rewriting of history for nationalistic purposes. An objective look at historical facts will tell us that the proper starting date for the War of Resistance against Japan should be the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of July 7, 1937 rather than the Mukden Incident of September 18, 1931. However, a 14-year war is better for the CCP's legitimizing narrative than an 8-year war, as the GMD did indeed follow a policy of non-resistance to Japan before the Xi'an Incident of 1936, and the CCP did indeed resist Japan sporadically after 1931.

Historically, there are multiple reasons for why an 8-year war is more credible than a 14-year war, many of which have been aptly communicated by Chinese scholars before 2017. If one is to view history through the lens of Marxist dialectics, as the CCP does, the principal contradiction in Chinese society between the Marco Polo Bridge Incident and the Mukden Incident was indeed domestic class struggle.<sup>50</sup> The Chinese Civil War was in full swing until the Xi'an Incident. Moreover, the Nanjing government was the internationally recognized government of China at that point in time, rather than the Communists, and thus the crux of Chinese government policy did not rest on resisting Japan prior to the Marco Polo Bridge Incident.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore,



after the Mukden Incident, Chinese resistance in the Northeast was quite passive; out of the 4 months and 18 days it took the Japanese to conquer the Northeast, less than 18 of those days consisted of active Chinese military resistance.<sup>52</sup> Lastly, partial resistance against Japan after the Mukden Incident was interrupted and only developed gradually.<sup>53</sup>

The above rationale for the 8-year war is much more historically objective than that of a 14-year war, which largely appeals to emotion and nationalistic sentiments. Proponents of the 14-year war largely argued that an 8-year war would favor the GMD policy of nonresistance and trivialize the resistance of the Northeasterners and others before 1937. On the contrary, proponents of the 8-year war have relied more closely on historical objectivity, arguing that war should be between two countries—which was not the case between China and Japan until after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident. Simply put, before 1937, most Chinese as well as Japanese people did not consider themselves at war.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, it is clear that the CCP is engaged in the process of purposefully rewriting history to serve the purposes of nationalism and patriotic education. That the CCP would do this is no surprise—it has engaged in the rewriting of historical fact since the founding of the PRC in 1949, and prior to representing mainland China on the international stage as well. In the West, the most commonly known instances of this are the careful treatment of the Mao era, particularly the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and the erasure of the Tiananmen Square Massacre from public memory. However, the decisive shift of the timeline of the War of Resistance against Japan, which is impacting international as well as domestic scholarship, should not be underestimated, as it has serious implications for not only the other Allied powers in World War II, but also other countries that are currently diplomatically and economically engaged with China. U.S. policymakers should thus emphasize the promotion of the objective study of Chinese history, both domestically and internationally. This could include convening international research symposiums to encourage global scholars to critically engage with Chinese history. In addition, U.S. policymakers must resolutely oppose the continued attempts of the Chinese state to coerce prominent academic journals into silence on issues related to modern Chinese history.

## Conclusion

In what can be considered the Party's official response to the "date debate," written by Cao Ziyang in 2017 for *Research on Party History and Literature* (党史与文献研究), Cao notes that the CCP supported the 14-year timeline as "an answer to long-standing appeals by domestic scholars and the common people."<sup>55</sup> After the pronouncement from the Ministry of Education, the "date debate" was effectively over—the Party had finally weighed in. It would be easy to dismiss this Party pronouncement as a simple rewriting of history from the top-down. Yet history and politics are rarely so black-and-white. Such is the case with the "date debate"—many historians, largely from Northeastern China, worked to shift public and Party opinion. Additionally, it is important to note that although the Communist Party was not the mainstay of the War of Resistance, as it so often claims, China under the Nanjing government did sacrifice much in fighting Japan. Because of Chinese efforts, the Soviet Union was able to avoid a two-front war, and the United States was able to engage in its "Europe First" strategy to defeat the Nazis before focusing on the Pacific Theater. If we are to engage effectively with China in the twenty-first century, we would do well to remember both its contributions as an Allied power, while simultaneously being on the lookout for attempts by the CCP to distort historical veracity for the purposes of political gain.

As we contemplate the rise of China today, we must carefully consider how the Chinese leadership represents its own history, both to domestic and international audiences. How the CCP constructs its historical narrative is crucial for policymakers to understand because it has direct implications for geopolitics. For instance, the emphasis on 14 years of resistance against Japan means that China seeks to portray itself as a moral, peaceful actor as it expands its geopolitical power. For domestic and foreign policy, this means that China seeks to reframe its aggressive actions today in places such as Xinjiang and the South China Sea by altering its own historical record. It also has direct implications for the academic world as we can expect continued efforts by the Chinese government to coerce international academic journals—and governments—into silence or selective interpretations of Chinese history. In the near future, I predict that this will encompass not only tragedies such as the Cultural Revolution or the Tiananmen Square Massacre, but also the War of Resistance against Japan. Thus, U.S. policymakers should do everything in

their power to continue to promote historical objectivity in the study of modern China and encourage academic freedom globally so as to avoid scholastic pandering to a CCP-dominant version of Chinese history.

*The views expressed are the author's alone, and do not represent the views of the U.S. Government or the Wilson Center.*

## Notes

- 1 The ending date of the war remained the same, with the Japanese emperor's unconditional surrender to the Allied forces on August 15, 1945. The PRC State Council had begun to discuss this shift in October 2016 and gave the Department of Education two months to compile a public pronouncement. "Jiaoyubu Fa Han: Zhongxiaoxue Jiaocai Banian Kangzhan Gaiwei Shisinin Kangzhan" [Letter from the Ministry of Education: Elementary and Middle School Education Materials War of Resistance against Japan Changed from Eight Years to Fourteen Years], Xinhua Net, 11 January 2017, retrieved from [xinhuanet.com/2017-01/11/c\\_1120284611.htm](http://xinhuanet.com/2017-01/11/c_1120284611.htm) on 7 April 2020.
- 2 Liu Yingfeng, "Kangzhan Shengli 70 Zhounian Heping Xishu Lishi" [Marking the 70th Anniversary of Victory Against Japan], *Taiwan Guanghua Zazhi*, July 2015, retrieved from <https://www.taiwan-panorama.com/en/Articles/Details?Guid=6e1a7132-a55b-43e3-955f-65051dfca4da&CatId=2> on 8 April 2020.
- 3 Cao Ziyang, "'Banian Kangzhan' yu 'Shisinin Kangzhan' Gainian Yunyong Zhi Sikao" [Reflections on the Conceptual Usage of the "Eight-year War of Resistance" and the "Fourteen-year War of Resistance"], *Dangshi yu Wenxian Yanjiu* [Research on Party History and Documents] 5 and 6 (2017), 47.
- 4 Hans van de Ven, *China at War: Triumph and Tragedy in the Emergence of the New China* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), 65-69.
- 5 According to the Boxer Protocol of 1901, foreign countries had the right to station troops outside of their diplomatic missions in Beijing. Japan, which by the 1930s had a sizeable military presence across northern China, was one of the few countries that continued to take advantage of these stipulations after the Nationalist capital was established in the southern city of Nanjing in 1927. Ibid.
- 6 The version of the events of July 7, 1937 in Chinese scholarship is more conspiratorial, claiming that the "disappearance" of the Japanese private was merely an excuse to instigate aggression, and that the Marco Polo Bridge Incident was "a long premeditated act of war." He Li, *Zhongguo Renmin Kangri Zhanzheng Shi* [History of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japan] (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 2015), 64.
- 7 Cao, 47.
- 8 The railway was part of the South Manchurian Railway (SMR), a behemoth Japanese-owned company that controlled a plethora of Japanese resources in the region. The Kwantung Army

- and the SMR were both created by the Japanese state in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) in the Guandong Leased Territory on the Liaodong Peninsula. The Kwantung Army's influence grew beyond just the defense of SMR assets to defend Japanese interests of Manchuria from both the growing threats of Chinese nationalism and, after 1917, of the Soviet Union. Mariko Asano Tamanoi, ed., *Crossed Histories: Manchuria in the Age of Empire* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 6-7.
- 9 The Japanese civilian government had no knowledge of the ruse and was caught off guard by the Kwantung Army's rapid invasion of southern Manchuria. Partially for this reason, the government cabinet under liberal prime minister Wakatsuki Reijiro quickly fell. Subsequent government cabinets all felt obliged to defend the occupation of Manchuria in the face of international criticism. Rana Mitter, *The Manchurian Myth: Nationalism, Resistance, and Collaboration in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 4-5.
  - 10 Rana Mitter, *China's Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 62.
  - 11 Zhang Haiyan, "Bo 'Qi Qi' Shibian Kangri Zhanzheng Qidian Lun – Cong Riben Shiliao Jieli Kangri Zhanzheng Qidian" [Refuting the Marco Polo Bridge Incident War of Resistance against Japan Starting Point Narrative – Exposing the Starting Point of the War of Resistance against Japan from Japanese Historical Artifacts], *Liaoning Guangbo Dianshi Daxue Xuebao* [Journal of Liaoning TV and Radio University] 134 (2015), 109-110.
  - 12 He Ying, "Kangri Zhanzheng Jiuqing Ying Cong Heshi Suan Qi" [From When Should the War of Resistance against Japan Start?], *Journal of Yan'an University* 2 (1984), 22.
  - 13 Ibid, 22.
  - 14 Jian Ming, "Qiqi Shibian Qian Jubu Kangzhan de Lishi Diwei he Zuoyong" [The Historical Position and Utilization of the Partial War of Resistance before the Marco Polo Bridge Incident], *Changbai Journal* 4 (1985), 16.
  - 15 Ibid, 16.
  - 16 This is the case on both sides of the Taiwan Straits. John J. Stephan, "The Tanaka Memorial (1927): Authentic or Spurious?", *Modern Asian Studies* 7:4 (1973), 734.
  - 17 Jian Ming, 16.
  - 18 *Ibid.*, 20.
  - 19 Guang Deming, "Kangri Zhanzheng Qidian Yanjiu Shuping" [Commentary on the Research on the Start of the War of Resistance against Japan], *Shehui Kexue Baokan* [Social Science Journal] 70 (1990).
  - 20 Wang Xiuying, "Lun Shisi Nian Kangzhan" [Discussion on the 14 Years of the War of Resistance], *Shenyang Jiaoyu Xueyuan Bao* [Journal of Shenyang College of Education] 1:4 (1999), 20.
  - 21 Ibid, 21.
  - 22 Song Li, "Kangzhan Qidian Yanjiu Shuping" [Commentary on the Research on the Start of the War of Resistance], *Shehui Kexue Dongtai* [Social Science Developments] (1997), 17-18.
  - 23 Lei Xinshi, "Di Er Ci Shijie Zhanzheng Qiyu Heshi?" [When Did World War II Begin?], *Shaanxi Shi Daxue Bao* [Journal of Shaanxi Normal University] 24.4 (1995), 31-34.
  - 24 Pan Xiangsheng, "Ying Qubie Shijie Fan Faxisi Zhanzheng he Di Er Ci Shijie Dazhan de bu Tong Qidian" [The Differing Starting Dates of the Global Anti-Fascist War and World War

- II Should be Differentiated], *The Journal of Studies of China's Resistance War against Japan*, 2 (1993), 211-217.
- 25 Wang Guilin, "Zhong Guo Kangri Zhanzheng yu Di Er Ci Shijie Dazhan de Qidian" [The Starting Points of the War of Resistance against Japan and World War II], *Beijing Dang Shi Yanjiu* [Beijing Party History Research] 3 (1993), 42.
- 26 "Xi Jinping Kangzhan Shiguan de "Ba Da Yao Yi"" [Eight Key Points on Xi Jinping's Historical View of the War of Resistance], Xinhua Wang, retrieved from [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-08/14/c\\_128127946.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-08/14/c_128127946.htm) on 13 August 2020.
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- 31 Zhang Zhenkun, "Kangri Zhanzheng: Ba Nian Haishi Shisi Nian?" [The War of Resistance against Japan: Eight Years or Fourteen Years?], *Kangri Zhanzheng Yanjiu* [Research on the War of Resistance against Japan], 1 (2006), 184-191.
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- 33 Huang Aijun, "Dui Kangri Zhanzheng Qidian Wenti de Tantaoyao" [Inquiry into the Issue of the Starting Date of the War of Resistance against Japan], *Xinan Keji Daxue Xuebao* [Journal of Xinan University of Science and Technology] 27:1 (2010), 1-6.
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- 36 This is based on a number of personal interviews I conducted in the fall of 2017.
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- 38 See, for example, Wang Zheng's *Never Forget National Humiliation* and Kirk Denton's *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China*.
- 39 Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Wurttemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

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- 44 Timothy Cheek, "Mao, Revolution, and Memory" in Timothy Cheek, ed., *A Critical Introduction to Mao* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 21.
- 45 For more on this, see Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II 1937-1945* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2013), 13.
- 46 One of the best-known examples is Claire Chennault and the "Flying Tigers." See Daniel Ford, *Flying Tigers: Claire Chennault and the American Volunteer Group* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).
- 47 Liu Tinghua, "Zhongguo Kangri Zhanzheng Shi Yanjiu de Jige Wenti" [Several Research Questions on the History of the Chinese War of Resistance against Japan], *Shixue Yuekan* [History Monthly] 3 (1987), 56.
- 48 "Xi Jinping: Zai Jinian Zhongguo Renmin Kangri Zhanzheng ji Shijie Fan Faxisi Zhanzheng Shengli 75 Zhou Nian Zuotanhui shang de Jianghua" [Xi Jinping: Speech at the Symposium Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japan and World War II], Xinhua Wang, retrieved from [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-09/03/c\\_1126449917.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-09/03/c_1126449917.htm) on 8 October 2020.
- 49 Mitter, *China's Good War*, 4.
- 50 Cao Ziyang, 50.
- 51 Ibid, 51.
- 52 Ibid, 51.
- 53 Ibid, 51.
- 54 Mitter, *China's Good War*, 92.
- 55 Cao, 52.