



Reforming History: Putting the CCP Back Into China's Historical Narratives

Dr Sow Keat Tok, CCCS Deputy Director

On 3rd January 2017, China's Ministry of Education issued an [administrative decree](#) to local education departments across the country to initiate a seemingly innocuous change in its primary and secondary school history texts. The taught history of the Second Sino-Japanese War would henceforth be extended by six years to stretch from 1931 to 1945. The official position is that the event that marks the beginning of the war, previously the 7th July 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident, is now the 18th September 1931 Shenyang (Mukden) Incident. China's struggle against their Japanese invaders in World War II has acquired a new numerical symbol: from eight (years) to fourteen.

This puzzling change is actually part of the backstory of China's move to 'reform' its official history to bolster popular support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Xi Jinping's stewardship. The project began in earnest in 2013 with [Xi declaring that "History is the best textbook"](#) (历史是最好的教科书 *lishi shi zuihao de jiaokeshu*) in a series of speeches and in the CCP central committee's group learning sessions. This then led on to a new frenzy over history learning, and a corresponding demand to adapt the official historical narratives to suit the needs of the CCP. This is occurring at a time when the Party, under Xi, finds its legitimacy to rule increasingly questioned by alternative discourses of political accountability in a globalised world. While Xi's anti-corruption campaign and renewed political reforms have become the signatures of his leadership, reforming China's history provides the tonic to strengthen the very spirit of the Party. Reinstating an orthodox historiography for public consumption has become the imminent task at hand.

Popularising the War of Resistance against Japan

The latest change to 'fourteen years' of War of Resistance against Japan signifies the CCP's intent to reemphasise the Party's role during the war. This has been partly a reaction to rectify the [increasing marginalisation of the CCP in more recent history debates](#) about its contribution towards the Chinese people's war efforts. There are fears that ["historical nihilism"](#)—defined by the Party as interpretations of history that reject the 'inevitability' of China's road to Socialism—will undermine the Party's legitimacy. Orthodox Party history, and the learning of it, has drawn a level of attention unseen since China's 1978 reforms began. The Party features prominently across all narratives today, as it intensifies its efforts to bind itself to the fate of the Chinese nation.

Indeed, tying the Party to the Chinese nation has been a strong theme of Xi's approach from the start. His China Dream project of "realising the great revitalisation of the Chinese nation" (实现中华民族伟大复兴 *shixian zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*) links invariably to the centrality of the CCP. At the same time, this supposedly forward-looking project comes with a teleological view into the past: to ascertain and remind the public of the CCP's historical role as the vanguard of the Chinese nation.

In 2014, the most notable legislative motions passed in relation to Xi's new approach were the addition of four new 'commemorative days' to the Chinese political and social calendars: Victory Day of the Resistance War (September 3), Martyr Day (September 30), Constitution Day (December 3), and Memorial Day for the Victims of the Nanjing Massacre (December 13). These were passed on three different sittings of the National People's Congress, but all within 10 months of each other. They were then succeeded by massive national displays, beginning in late 2014, in conjunction with the themes of these commemorations.

Two particular events stood out. First, in December 2014, the annual Nanjing Massacre commemoration became a [national day of reflection](#), when Xi Jinping and four other members of the Politburo, Zhang Dejiang, Ma Kai, Liu Qibao and Xu Qiliang graced the event that was held at the Nanjing Massacre Memorial. The event was broadcast live on national and local television stations, including a 12-hour commemorative 'special' on Jiangxi TV station that was patched onto different local and national broadcasts at different times. The theme conceived was one of "Never forget national humiliation in realising the China Dream" (勿忘国耻圆梦中华 *wuwang guochi yuanmeng zhonghua*). The connections between China's past and Xi's projected future for China were made abundantly clear.

Second, a large 'Victory Parade' was held on 3rd September 2015. The parade was held in honour of the 'Victory Day' passed in the previous year, and was the first time a large-scale military parade was held in Tiananmen Square outside of the decennial Liberation Day celebrations. The parade showed off China's latest military technologies to an international and domestic audience. It was also broadcast across a broad range of social media platforms, including those not accessible in mainland China, such as [Youtube](#). The theme yet again linked back to Xi's China Dream: "Building our future through remembering history, commemorating our martyrs and treasuring peace" (铭记历史缅怀先烈珍惜和平开创未来 *mingji lishi mianhuai xianlie zhenxi heping kaichuang weilai*).

These World War II commemorative events coincided with an intensification of public exposure to other related materials. For example, during the formative stage of this 'reform', between 2013 and 2015, out of the 39 occurrences where the phrase "history is the best textbook" appeared in *People's Daily*, as many as 21 also have the words "war of resistance against Japan" (抗日战争 *kangri zhanzheng*). In 2015 alone, more than 10 World War II-themed museums opened across China in conjunction with the 70th anniversary of the end of the war. For the older museums, previous exhibits were replaced by newer ones that tread the Party line. Even the motifs and symbols of the war of resistance were redesigned, as the CCP-nation nexus became more pronounced. The Pagoda of Yanan (延安宝塔 *yanan baota*), for example, a long time symbol of the Long March and the spirit of the CCP, now features prominently at World War II memorials and has become [intertwined with the War of Resistance](#).

Meanwhile, the phrase “national humiliation” (国耻 *guochi*) became more prevalent in public discourse, with an average of 331 appearances per year between 2013 and 2016, 1.8 times more than the yearly average during Hu Jintao era.

Rallying domestic support to face external challenges?

Xi Jinping inherited a range of social and political tensions from his predecessor. Reform efforts have flagged as the Chinese economy undergoes a transition, while gaps between the haves and the have-nots are driving deep fissures through the society that the CCP seeks to govern. Given the circumstances, coupling Xi’s anti-corruption campaign to shake up the Party with a spiritual cleansing campaign to reform China’s history (in the CCP’s favour) appears a good way to boost the Party’s support levels.

The biggest casualty of this ‘reformist’ effort is no doubt contemporary China-Japan relations. Already caught up in its own swing towards the political right, Japan is ripe for the picking for the Chinese official spin-masters. Even unofficial opinion-makers — the likes of *Weibo* celebrities and popular blog writers— were confined to operating within the new discursive framework set out by the Xi administration. Already, labels such as “traitor” and “nihilist” were used against detractors who refused to get in step with the official discourse. And really, who is to argue against a patriot who protects the motherland from foreign, especially Japanese, encroachment? Political, and indeed, historical correctness, has hit a new high as Xi uses history as the cement to patch up a political establishment for which mass support may be waning. While the CCP is by no means in danger of losing power in the foreseeable future, the reminder of China’s humiliation by Japanese invaders during World War II is a convenient rallying flag to spur political mobilisation and deflect attention from woes at home.

The furore in January 2017 [against Japanese hotel chain APA](#), which was accused of placing in its guest rooms a controversial Japanese-language history textbook that denies the Nanjing Massacre, is but another small episode in this bigger development. Xi’s history reforms, as we see in the new 14 year War of Resistance against Japan, will continue to put China-Japan relations under strain for many years to come. The region has to brace itself for an increasingly combustible China-Japan relationship underlined by jingoist fervour.