

# The Cautionary Tale of Painting War Remembrance in China as a New Nationalism

Review of *China's Good War: How  
World War II Is Shaping a New  
Nationalism* by Rana Mitter, Belknap  
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For more than seventy years after World War II, the Second Sino-Japanese War remains a lively topic in China. Rana Mitter, a prominent historian in Britain who specializes in modern Chinese history, has put forth his newest work on China's rediscovery of its wartime memory. His previous publications, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937–1945*, and *China's War with Japan, 1937–1945: The Struggle for Survival*, all contributed to the arguably less-discussed Chinese war of resistance in the English-language literature. Mitter's newest work, *China's Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism*, portrays the postwar historiographical shift in China's war narrative and how memories contribute to the longevity of war legacies in modern Chinese policymaking, popular culture, and diplomatic strategies.

Mitter aims to analyze the modern discourse surrounding World War II in China, specifically the manifestations of the war in historiographical

arguments, diplomacy, online communities, movies, and museums.<sup>1</sup> The author crafts firstly a historiographical chapter on the evolution of the Chinese-state narrative regarding the war. Mitter is correct that before the Deng era, the Chinese official and social memory of the Second Sino-Japanese War largely revolved around Communist leadership in war efforts, as many Chinese citizens would recall. The post-1980 shift in Chinese historiography allowed discussions of nationalist war efforts to enter the Chinese academy and society.<sup>2</sup> The necessity of a narrative shift partly explains China's memory vacuum in the immediate postwar era, a period in which European nations actively pursued reconciliation leading to a study of collective European trauma.

Mitter identifies the Chinese discourse on the war as having both liberal and restricted elements.<sup>3</sup> As the Chinese state eases its claim on war leadership, diversification of narrative occurs in both the Chinese public sphere and Internet communities. Mitter draws on an intriguing phenomenon called *guofen* 國粉 on the Chinese Internet where pro-Kuomintang (KMT), or Chinese Nationalist Party, people are free to voice their admiration of the Nationalist Chinese government and its war efforts while constantly exchanging heated debates with pro-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) voices.<sup>4</sup> Such a relaxation of narrative is almost unthinkable in the pre-1980 atmosphere, and it also appears in the positive image given to the Chinese Nationalist forces on screen, with recent blockbusters like *The Flowers of War* (2011) and *The Eight Hundred* (2020) achieving overwhelming popularity among the Chinese public. In contrast, their receptions overseas have been much more limited, as non-European war narratives struggle to find markets in the Western film industry. Or, as Mitter puts it, prejudices and

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1. Rana Mitter, *China's Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2020), 7.

2. Mitter, *China's Good War*, 15.

3. Mitter, 17–18.

4. Mitter, 145, 159–60.

limitations from the West in fact have prompted China to promote its war narratives.<sup>5</sup>

Since “new nationalism” constitutes the book’s title, readers would expect it to be one of the structural backbones of Mitter’s thesis. Ideally, new nationalism would entail a theoretical framework that introduces the evolution of nationalism in modern Chinese history, specifically the underlying old and existing Chinese nationalism. Instead, Mitter positions the Chinese framework of war remembrance—namely, its state-led mnemonic policies—into a competition of ideology between China and other liberal countries. It would be constructive if Mitter included a historiographical chapter to contextualize what is new about the new nationalism. Examples of earlier Chinese nationalist thought such as Sun Yat-sen’s *Three Principles of the People*, which entailed characteristics of nationalism based on culture, ethnic identification, and polity, would provide an excellent historiographical evolutionary model for Mitter’s take on Chinese nationalism.

Mitter does not view Chinese politics through an ethnonationalistic lens (Han nationalism), nor does he paint Chinese diplomatic actions as superior culturalism. The new nationalism he presents to the readership is akin to Eric Hobsbawm’s theory, where right-wing European political parties fanned nationalistic sentiments among the populace to expand their social base.<sup>6</sup> Mitter applies this European practice to China and calls it *circuits of memory*,<sup>7</sup> where the Chinese state brought social memory of the Second Sino-Japanese War into the modern construction of Chinese nationhood and international identity. *Circuits of memory* make sense when considering the state-led national museum projects and the 2017 history textbook revisions regarding the war dates. However, by limiting the scope of the new nationalism solely to China’s rediscovery of its wartime memories, Mitter’s usage of the term is similar to James Townsend’s 1996 prediction that China

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5. Mitter 158.

6. Roger D. Markwick and Nicholas Doumanis, “The Nationalization of the Masses,” *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2016, 4–5, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199695669.013.21>.

7. Mitter, *China’s Good War*, 14, 48.

will wield its “assertive” nationalism on unresolved territorial claims,<sup>8</sup> along with the worsening potential for Sino-Japanese relations moving forward.

Furthermore, without a precise definition and comprehensive historiography, Mitter regrettably steers his discussion of new nationalism along the lines of geopolitics and regional power play. He repeatedly mentions China’s assertive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region, referring to China’s status as *daguo* 大國, a big country, in the speeches by President Xi and senior statesman Yang Jiechi.<sup>9</sup> While China is undoubtedly a *daguo* in size, this characterization should be seen within its historical frame. One might recall Deng Xiaoping’s 1974 UN speech where the Chinese leader remarked that national sovereignties should be counted as equal regardless of their physical size, and China would not partake in hegemonism in its future international relations. Xi Jinping, too, made prominent mention in 2009 of China’s non-interventionist practices in its international relations. In this book, Mitter presents mainly the hawkish responses of Chinese diplomacy in recent years without mentioning China’s diplomatic restraint in unison. Hopefully, his observations about the new nationalism would invite further studies into Chinese war narratives, not limited to diplomatic actions, but also considering the Chinese social and political atmosphere at the time.

In terms of sources in his chapter on the Chinese historiography of postwar memories, Mitter has extensively consulted senior mainland historians on their positions over the post-1980 transition of the Chinese war narrative. However, Mitter provides scant evidence to back up some of his arguments. One notable example of such inadequacy lies in his analysis of the debate over the war’s dates, where the Chinese government revised the starting point of the Second Sino-Japanese War to an earlier point. Mitter assumes that political pressures from northeast China potentially prompted the date revision, since the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria remained

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8. James Townsend, “Chinese Nationalism,” in *Chinese Nationalism*, ed. Jonathan Unger (New York: Routledge, 2015), 18–20.

9. Mitter, *China’s Good War*, 88.

a relatively isolated incident outside the traditional Chinese narrative of an “eight-year war of resistance.”<sup>10</sup> Mitter backs up his argument simply by referring to his 2018 interview with a senior Chinese historian, yet he does not disclose the interview’s context or the interviewee.<sup>11</sup> It is not clear why Mitter omits the name of the Chinese historian, since his interview reveals ample “backstage” information behind the potential political overreach into Chinese academic circles, and such a mysterious interview would naturally arouse questions from an informed readership.

Mitter favors the traditional “eight-year war” narrative by calling 1937 a more plausible starting date. He backs up his position with an argument that people in China and Japan did not perceive themselves to be at war before 1937, using the 1933 Tanggu Truce as a case in which hostilities came to a halt between the two states.<sup>12</sup> However, civilian publications in Republican China, starting from 1931, widely expressed Chinese civil outrage toward Japanese invasions.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Mitter draws on the Western liberal studies of memory to guide how the Chinese memory framework should be understood. Viewing China through a liberal lens is fair as long as Mitter acknowledges the fundamental differences between the Chinese postwar memory and Western ones. An example of the above manifests in Mitter’s criticism that mainland China refrains from commemorating Nationalist

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10. Mitter, 84, 92.

11. Mitter, 71, 79, 100.

12. Mitter, 92.

13. See publications between 1931–1936: 十九路軍抗日血戰史 [The Bloody Battles of the NRA 19th Route Army] and 東北義勇軍 [The Brave Volunteers of the Northeast]. Accessible via National Central Library, “Home,” National Library of China, accessed October 25, 2022, <https://taiwanebook.ncl.edu.tw/zh-tw>; Chen Binhe 陳彬蘇, *Dong Bei Yi Yong Jun* 東北義勇軍 [The brave volunteers of the Northeast], 1st ed., ebook. Reprint (Ri Ben Yan Jiu She, 日本研究社 [Japan Research Group], 1932), <https://taiwanebook.ncl.edu.tw/zh-tw/book/NCL-9910010553>; Hua Zhenzhong 華振中 and Zhu Bokang 朱伯康, *Shi Jiu Lu Jun Kang Ri Xue Zhan Shi* 十九路軍抗日血戰史 [The history of the 19th Route Army’s bloody battles], 1st ed., ebook. Reprint (Shanghai: Shen Zhou Guo Guang She 神州國光社, 1947), <https://taiwanebook.ncl.edu.tw/zh-tw/book/NCL-003150271>.

casualties during the Chinese Civil War.<sup>14</sup> One can articulate a comparison between the Chinese Civil War with the American one, that under the liberal frameworks of memory, the American Confederacy on the losing side still enjoys a degree of commemoration in the southern United States. Such an argument is problematic since, firstly, the KMT authorities in Taiwan, too, made no commemoration of the Communist casualties. Secondly, the Chinese Civil War is technically still ongoing, with no formal end of hostilities ever signed by either belligerent. Therefore, by Mitter's logic, if a liberal commemoration of all Chinese Civil War casualties is ever to occur, it can only transpire with the war's final cessation.

If all the arguments mentioned earlier produce room for more profound scholarly debates on the Chinese memory of the war, Mitter stresses a few other ideas that would surely attract heated contestations. In the book's concluding chapter, the author firmly paints China's war narrative as a quest for international prestige, virtue by sacrifice, and leverage in the policymaking in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>15</sup> Mitter points out the debatable nature of aligning the Nanking Massacre with the Holocaust in that such events are incomparable since the Japanese slaughter of Chinese civilians and soldiers did not equate to an "attempted genocide."<sup>16</sup> Mitter subjectively suggests that Chinese diplomacy is both "inept" and "often clumsy,"<sup>17</sup> that China's current quest to seek restorative justice as a victim during the war is unwelcome, since contemporary China has become immensely powerful.<sup>18</sup> Mitter's last argument is deeply problematic because he conflates two separate concepts into one—namely, the strength of a nation and the quest for justice. Should China, Korea, and other Asian countries ravaged by imperial Japan forgo undue justice simply due to the improvement in their conditions? Or, should nations give up seeking justice for war crimes because a number

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14. Mitter, *China's Good War*, 211, 257.

15. Mitter, 218, 236.

16. Mitter, 238.

17. Mitter, 221, 239.

18. Mitter, 242.

of their people have “moved on” through the passage of time? Mitter’s argument might be applicable if the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) had thoroughly carried out the sentences given to Japanese war criminals, yet this was not the case; by 1956, the majority of convicted Class A Japanese war criminals were released from Sugamo prison.<sup>19</sup> Although Mitter attempts to steer the revision of Chinese war narratives in the age-old rhetorical direction of the “China threat,” his political spectatorship about unresolved justice will likely face a cold reception in China and among many of its neighbors.

Overall, Mitter’s book serves as a fine general introduction to how the Chinese state attempts to direct war narratives and how war memories became integral in modern Chinese society for readers interested in the relatively new field of Chinese postwar memories. Mitter’s work is valuable because he portrays aspects of Chinese social memory of the war similar to the liberal Western memory model. The divide between pro-KMT and pro-CCP voices in Chinese online communities, private and state-initiated commemorations, and diversified narratives in television and film regarding the war all separate China from stereotypical stigmas that perceive it as a state where only official narratives are allowed. However, the readership should exercise caution where Mitter’s political commentaries are concerned. It is fair to compare the Chinese model of memory and its Western liberal counterparts, yet Mitter’s overuse of “new nationalism” as his response to Chinese policymaking is damaging for readers who wish to observe the Chinese perspective on war memory with a degree of objective distance. While war memories in Europe may have seen amalgamation into a collective European trauma, for China and its neighbors, the trauma of Japanese militarism lingers on, unresolved.

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19. David Cohen and Yuma Totani, *The Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal: Law, History, and Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 53.

