

Jeremy Brown, prepublication draft
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China's Good War: How World War II is Shaping a New Nationalism

Rana Mitter

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“Chinese people do not attack Chinese people,” Xi Jinping said in 2019. Xi’s point was to imagine a peaceful takeover of Taiwan, but he missed the mark because people in Taiwan increasingly identify as Taiwanese rather than as Chinese. Beyond the immediate issue of Taiwan, Xi must have known that he was making a false statement. Chinese people have fought against Chinese people on many occasions during the twentieth century, most obviously during the civil war between Communists and Nationalists, and also during Mao Zedong’s war against rural people (the Great Leap Famine of the early 1960s), Mao’s war against the Communist Party itself (also known as the Cultural Revolution, 1966–76), and in June 1989, when the People’s Liberation Army used machine guns and tanks to kill unarmed civilians on the streets of Beijing.

The undeniable history of the Chinese Communist Party leading Chinese people to attack other Chinese people is not pretty. It undermines the Communist Party’s moral justifications for its rule. This is why, as Rana Mitter convincingly argues in *China’s Good War*, the Communist Party has embraced a reassessment of China’s role in World War II, moving from a pro-Communist, anti-Nationalist story to one that recognizes Nationalist soldiers’ and Chiang Kai-shek’s significant contributions. Narratives of fourteen years of shared sacrifice against a foreign enemy (beginning with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and ending in August 1945) and earning a seat at the table of global superpowers—quite literally in Cairo in 1943, when Chiang negotiated as an equal with Churchill and Roosevelt—have all combined to make China’s World War II experience politically useful for a variety of people in the People’s Republic, from researchers to top leaders to clever critics.

During the Mao years, propaganda depicted Japan and the Nationalist Party as equally nefarious imperialist or reactionary enemies of “the people,” while playing up the Communist Party’s role as the only legitimate source of resistance against Japan. Beginning in the 1980s and continuing in recent decades, government grants have funded specialized journals and collections of historical materials related to China’s war against Japan. The goal of these projects has been to depict China as strong, victorious, moral, and just. The result has been to broaden the scope of acceptable commemoration by treating Nationalist soldiers and leaders as brothers in arms.

Mitter’s most penetrating observations relate to how ordinary people have used contested memories of China’s good war to implicitly critique the Communist Party’s attacks on Chinese people. Mitter analyzes the online phenomenon of *Guofen* (Nationalist Party fans), who not only argue that the Nationalist Army was the leading resistance force during World War II, but who also want the Nationalists’ constitution and founding ideology to rule over mainland China today. Earlier this year an ardent *Guofen* from Shandong Province took my class about modern China at Simon Fraser University in Canada. His weekly statements about the superiority of Sun Yat-sen’s Three Principles of the People arose from his profound dissatisfaction with censorship and repression in China under Xi Jinping. For *Guofen*, celebrating Nationalist rule is less absurd than it seems because their imagined alternate world once had a basis in reality in mainland China. And that the same Nationalist Party still lingers on in a multiparty democracy in Taiwan.

The story of property developer Fan Jianchuan, who established the Jianchuan Museum Cluster in Sichuan Province, is one of the most illuminating parts of Mitter's book. On a surface level, the Jianchuan Museum Cluster's exhibits about World War II adhere to messages about shared sacrifice and national victory, garnering favourable coverage in China's official press and allowing Fan's private museums to survive in the Xi Jinping era. Beneath the surface, however, Fan's project pushes against boundaries, portraying Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek as being on the same side, musing about the motivations of the hundreds of thousands of Chinese people who collaborated with the Japanese occupiers, and critiquing how Nationalist soldiers were demonized and persecuted during the Cultural Revolution.

Looking at recent memories of China's good war is a natural progression for Mitter, whose previous books have focused on the history of the war itself. Mitter shows how conversations about one proud part of China's history are in fact conversations about more recent traumas.