At the start of the twenty-first century, Japan would like to be seen as a nation-state looking to the future. Even in recession, it remains an economic superpower, its popular culture particularly in the monochrome terms of a classic Confucian history: the Nationalist base areas, in particular the Shaan-GanNing base with its capital at Yan’an. For all other major powers involved in the Second World War, victorious or defeated, engagement with their war experience was a crucial part of creating postwar identity, whether it was Britain coming to terms with the loss of its empire, France and Germany seeking a new type of European union, or Japan turning from strong-armed empire to democratized economic powerhouse. Of all the major powers, only China failed as a society to engage with the meaning of its anti-Japanese conflict. This was in large part due to the way China moved from world war to Cold War. The Nationalists and Communists were at war by 1946, while the eventual victory of the Communists in 1949 meant that a balanced consideration of the earlier war was impossible, even though it had ended less than four years previously. Through most of the Cold War, the aspects of the War of Resistance to Japan discussed and fitted in China mostly related to the experience of the Communist base areas, in particular the Shaan-GanNing base with its capital at Yan’an.

This concentration meant other issues were absent from discussion: there was little engaged analysis of the role of the Nationalist government, Chinese collaboration in occupied areas, or activities in Communist base areas outside the Mao-dominated Northwest. Where the first two were discussed, it was generally in the binary terms of a classic Confucian history: the Nationalists were corrupt fools who cared only for themselves and little for China; the collaborators were worse, traitors beyond redemption. While the Japanese themselves were not forgotten, and the Cultural Revolution in particular gave Chinese people a chance to try them in savage caricature, much of the Chinese historical discussion of the war seemed to regard the enemies within as more important than the dangerous neighbours who had come across the sea of Japan.

A new war history

The 1980s marked a turning point in the Chinese treatment of the war. A combination of factors led to a change in the way both academic and public historians dealt with the conflict. In the early Cold War period, one of the motivations for the People’s Republic to soften its stance to Japan was a desire to detach Japan from the Cold War embrace of the US and achieve diplomatic recognition. With the opening of full relations between China and Japan in 1972, this was no longer an issue. Then, the deaths of implacable enemies Mao and Chiang stimulated the reformist Chinese government to find ways to woo Taiwan into reunification. Finally, the CCP’s domestic legitimacy came under serious pressure in the reform era as old Maoist economic certainties were abandoned.

The younger generation is, if anything, more inclined to harbour hostile feelings against Japan due to the war

In China, there has been a genuine and undeniable opening up of discussion about the war years. Yet much of it is still tied to an explicitly political, rather than historical agenda: the signs outside the museums in Nanjing and Beijing proclaim proudly and honestly that they are “sites for the encouragement of patriotic education.” This approach has meant that the changes in history still, sixty years on, look monolithic rather than nuanced; for instance, Chiang Kai-shek’s record of patriotism has been reassessed more positively (just as he has fallen from favour in Taiwan), but collaboration still remains a difficult subject to broach. The contrast with Taiwan is evident, where democratization and liberalization have led to much more complex and ambivalent responses to the period of Japanese rule. As long as the CCP remains unwilling to allow similar nuanced discussions of China’s own war experience, it will continue to provide fuel for the most unsavoury elements of the right in Japan.

Prospects

It is clear that sixty years after the end of World War II, positions in China and Japan over the meaning of the war have hardened. While there are entrenched positions on both sides, the space for public discussion of the wartime experience remains more multifaceted in Japan. There, polemicists of the far right take ludicrous negationist positions, arguing that atrocities such as the Nanjing massacre never took place, or else were wildly exaggerated. A quick glance at, for instance, diaries and letters from third-country missionaries suggests that this is historically untenable. Then again, a significant proportion of the mainstream of Japanese historians as well as public discussion acknowledges Japanese wartime guilt, and regards it as a reason why the country should not seek full rearmament. Indeed, it was left-wing Japanese journalists who were instrumental in drawing attention to the Nanjing massacre in the early 1970s when the subject was hardly discussed in China itself.

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For all other major powers involved in the period, the most notable example being the journal KangRo zhanzheng yanjiu (Research on the War of Resistance to Japan), published since 1991 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, their war experience remains more multifaceted in Japan. There, polemicists of the far right take ludicrous negationist positions, arguing that atrocities such as the Nanjing massacre never took place, or else were wildly exaggerated. A quick glance at, for instance, diaries and letters from third-country missionaries suggests that this is historically untenable. Then again, a significant proportion of the mainstream of Japanese historians as well as public discussion acknowledges Japanese wartime guilt, and regards it as a reason why the country should not seek full rearmament. Indeed, it was left-wing Japanese journalists who were instrumental in drawing attention to the Nanjing massacre in the early 1970s when the subject was hardly discussed in China itself.

A slow remembering: China’s memory of the war against Japan

Sparked by accusations that the Japanese Ministry of Education had authorized textbooks that whitewash atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers during the war, China’s public was allowed to vent its rage in April 2005. The Japanese consulate in Shanghai was attacked with stones and bottles, while the authorities warned foreigners of all nationalities to stay away from the demonstrations. Sixty years after the end of the Sino-Japanese war, the history of that period is becoming more, not less prominent in the contemporary politics of both societies.

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