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China's Ontological Security and Manipulation of Narratives

---A Comparative Study of Anti-Japanese Sentiment and Russophobia in Chinese Historical Narratives

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Introduction

China's government has long exhibited a selective memory in addressing historical disputes, invoking certain past traumas while downplaying others. This phenomenon is evident in how Beijing responds differently to similar provocations by different countries. For example, when the Japanese government nationalized three of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2012, it sparked an aggressive Chinese reaction, including dispatching ships to the area "backed by a furious propaganda wave" that unleashed mass anti-Japanese protests across China (Chubb 2024). Chinese demonstrators and state media alike hearkened back to Japan's past aggression, framing the island dispute as the latest chapter in a long history of Japanese imperialism. In contrast, when Russia's embassy in China posted on social media in 2020 celebrating the 160th anniversary of the founding of Vladivostok, Chinese netizens protested that Vladivostok, known as Haishenwai in Qing dynasty records, was once Chinese territory ceded to Russia in 1860 under an "unequal treaty." Many saw the post as an "insult and provocation," flooding Weibo with calls to "never forget national humiliation"(Wang, 2024). Yet notably, these nationalist outcries against Russia were swiftly curbed, and the Chinese government remained muted. This stark difference raises the question: why would the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) encourage popular indignation over Japan's actions but inhibit similar sentiment toward Russia, despite both touching on historical territorial losses?

Understanding this inconsistency requires recognizing how the CCP constructs historical narratives around its grand project of national rejuvenation. The CCP has promoted a narrative of China's "Century of Humiliation" (1840---1949), a litany of invasions, unequal treaties, and territorial dismemberment by foreign powers, and pledged to overcome this past as part of the nation's revival (Metcalf 2020). Through patriotic education and propaganda, the Party presents itself as the architect of China's resurrection from historical shame. Central to this narrative is the pledge to restore lost territories and dignity as proof of "national rejuvenation," a theme repeatedly emphasized by top leaders. For instance, President Xi Jinping has declared that

resolving the Taiwan question and achieving complete reunification is a “historic mission” of the CCP and essential to fulfilling the dream of national rejuvenation(Sacks 2021). While Taiwan and other disputes, such as the Diaoyu Islands, are spotlighted as unfinished business of national reunification, certain historical losses, notably territory ceded to Russia in the 19th century, are largely omitted from China’s official narrative of rejuvenation.

This selective remembrance raises two key questions: Why does China utilize different narratives for different historical disputes? And how does China reconcile contradictions in its historical narratives while balancing national identity with its foreign policy interests? The answers to these questions form the central puzzle of this paper.

Main Arguments

The main claim is that the CCP manipulates historical memory to balance ontological security with foreign policy needs. CCP strengthens its domestic legitimacy as the guardian of national dignity by amplifying anti-Japanese sentiment rooted in wartime atrocities and downplaying anti-Russian grievances over 19th-century territorial losses. This strategy also lets China maintain strategic partnerships like with Russia. The CCP uses historical memory to consolidate domestic power and navigate international complexities.

The contribution of this study is it identifies these selective narratives and provides important evidence, while also further explaining and discussing the reasons for doing so through ontological security theory. Beijing amplifies “chosen traumas” when they serve its strategic goals and silences or downplays others. Beijing manipulates history to project strength and consistency at home without undermining geopolitical priorities abroad, stoking popular anger at Japan’s past atrocities but downplaying Russia’s land grabs. The CCP must maintain a narrative of victimhood and righteous resurgence to legitimize its rule and heal historical wounds while

avoiding derailing diplomatic and security goals. This study supports this claim by reviewing key historical disputes and the CCP's narratives in educational material, media, and cultural products, as well as analysing China's behaviour in the context of ontological security theory from International Relations scholarship. In sum, Beijing uses selective historical narratives as tools to consolidate regime legitimacy and navigate international constraints.

To ground this argument, the next section reviews the ontological security literature, which explains why states cling to stable self-narratives and how that affects their policies.

Literature Review on Ontological Security

The concept of ontological security, originating in sociology and increasingly applied in International Relations (IR), provides a useful lens for analyzing China's manipulation of historical narratives. Ontological security, as defined by sociologist Anthony Giddens, refers to an actor's need for a stable sense of self derived from a "sense of continuity and order in events" in their life(Chrzanowski 2021; Giddens 1991). In other words, beyond physical safety, actors, including states, crave consistency in their identity and worldview. An ontologically secure state feels confident in who it is across time; disruptions to its self-narrative can cause deep anxiety. IR scholars such as Jennifer Mitzen(2006) and Brent Steele(2008) have extrapolated this concept to nation-states, arguing that states may prioritize identity continuity even above tangible security interests. Mitzen famously posited that states seek to maintain reliable relationships, even adversarial ones, because these routinized interactions help reinforce a stable self-identity in an uncertain world. She defines ontological security for states as the need to experience oneself as a "whole, continuous" entity through time in order to act with agency. Crucially, this drive for continuity can lead states to persist in familiar patterns---for example, enduring rivalries or repetitive conflicts---simply because such routines provide identity

certainty, even if they jeopardize physical security. In Mitzen's analysis, a protracted conflict can become comfortable in identity terms (who are we? we are the nation opposed to X), so a sudden peace may unsettle a state's sense of self. Steele similarly argues that states often pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence(Mitzen 2006). All of this suggests that states are not purely rational actors maximizing material power; they are also identity actors that strive to avoid the trauma of existential uncertainty.

Building on these foundations, a number of scholars have explored how states use narratives, especially historical narratives, to maintain ontological security. Christopher Browning observes that political actors tend to avoid fundamental changes to their self-concept; they prefer to "maintain established behaviors, routines, and identities to preserve a stable self-concept," even if external circumstances change(Christopher 2016). In practice, this means nations cling to familiar storylines about themselves (victim, victor, peacekeeper, etc.) because deviating from those narratives can induce anxiety. Ayşe Zarakol has applied ontological security to explain why states sometimes deny or reinterpret shameful historical episodes. In a study of Turkey and Japan, Zarakol argued that both states, facing the stigma of past atrocities/defeats, exhibited denialist narratives as a way to protect their self-identity from guilt or humiliation(Zarakol 2017). The ontological insecurity caused by confronting historical wrongdoing led elites to rewrite the past in more flattering terms, for instance, Japan's longstanding ambivalence in fully acknowledging wartime crimes, or Turkey's denial of the Armenian genocide, can be seen as attempts to align history with a positive national self-image. By "forgetting" or recasting certain painful memories, these states reduce the dissonance in their identity. Jelena Subotić likewise highlights the role of collective memory in state behavior. She finds that political leaders often selectively activate narratives of the past to justify current policy shifts or to solidify their base, thereby bridging gaps between new policies and entrenched identity, such as in Serbia(Subotić 2016). For example, a government might suddenly foreground a forgotten historical victory to inspire unity during a

foreign policy crisis, or conversely downplay an old grievance to enable rapprochement with a former foe. Subotić shows that such narrative management is not merely propaganda; it is fundamentally about ensuring the nation still "feels like itself" amid change. Ontological security scholars thus view state narratives as tools for identity management.

Within this literature, cases of states navigating between historical resentment and present strategic needs are particularly illuminating. Bahar Rumelili and Ayşe Betül Çelik (2017) discuss ontological insecurity in the context of protracted ethnic conflict, examining Turkey's struggle with its Kurdish minority. They note that in such asymmetric conflicts, both the state and the marginalized group face identity threats: the state fears acknowledging the other's narrative, as it could undermine the state's unitary identity, whereas the minority's identity is suppressed by the dominant historical narrative(Rumelili and Çelik 2017). This resonates with how China manages its history with different countries: Beijing upholds a strict single narrative domestically (century of humiliation overcome by CCP), which secures China's core identity, but it struggles with how to handle alternative narratives. For instance, Russian or Japanese views of those same historical events. The literature suggests that embracing complexity, though stabilizing in the long run, is often avoided in favor of simplified, self-affirming stories that keep the state's identity neatly intact.

Applying ontological security theory to China provides a compelling explanation for the CCP's selective historical memory. The CCP has, through decades of patriotic education, inculcated a master narrative of Chinese identity as the victim-turned-victor: a once-suffering nation that, under CCP leadership, is rising again to reclaim its due. This narrative is integral to Chinese ontological security, it tells the Chinese people who they are (a resurrected great civilization), where they came from (a century of humiliation), and where they are going (national rejuvenation). To maintain this continuous narrative, the CCP carefully curates the historical content. Events that fit the narrative, such as Japanese aggression that justifies victimhood, or CCP triumphs that justify pride, are amplified and

commemorated. Events that complicate it, such as having ceded huge territories to a current friend, or the CCP itself compromising on national territory, are minimized to avoid cognitive dissonance. After all, if the Chinese public were to strongly internalize the loss of Outer Manchuria to Russia as an unresolved humiliation, it could pose awkward questions: Why isn't our government fighting to get it back? Thus threatening the neatness of the CCP's story about ending the era of humiliation. As a result, to preserve ontological security, Chinese leaders promote a stable narrative but selectively edit its content. This strategy aligns with what the literature describes: states seek to ensure a "sense of continuity" in the self-narrative by controlling collective memory. The CCP's extensive control over education, museums, and media is key here. Since the 1990s, China's Patriotic Education Campaign has institutionalized the century-of-humiliation narrative in textbooks and popular culture, deeply embedding the approved version of history in the national psyche(Wang 2008). History textbooks highlight the Opium Wars, the Japanese invasion, and the CCP's role in liberation, while offering relatively scant mention of the Russian seizures or other inconvenient episodes, or framing them in a way that does not suggest current claims. State media similarly reinforces the narrative through films, TV dramas, and commemorative events that celebrate certain historical memories and ignore others. In essence, the CCP uses controlled remembrance as a tool to maintain a coherent national identity, one that supports its legitimacy and policy goals. Alternative or counter-narratives, for example, Chinese netizens pushing a harder line on Russian-ceded lands, are actively prevented from gaining traction by censorship or official counter-messaging. This mirrors what ontological security theorists observe globally: states often exercise narrative dominance to avoid ontological anxiety, challenges to the official story of "who we are".

In summary, the ontological security perspective helps explain why China behaves in ways that might seem inconsistent---harping on some historical issues but shelving others. The CCP's priority is to sustain a stable national narrative that underpins its identity and authority. To do so, it navigates between historical truth and

political necessity, ensuring continuity of the self-image above all. China's case thus exemplifies how states "use the past" selectively: not simply to maximize short-term gains, but to satisfy a deeper need for a consistent self-identity in the international arena. This theoretical understanding provides a backdrop for analyzing the implications of China's narrative strategy, which we conclude with below.

Historical Background

To appreciate China's selective historical claims, one must first understand the underlying historical grievances in question. Two major sets of territorial losses and invasion deeply inform China's sense of past injustice: lands ceded to the Russian Empire in the 19th century, and territories seized by Imperial Japan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These episodes form part of the "Century of Humiliation" that the CCP frequently invokes, yet they are remembered and politicized in very different ways.

Losses to Russia (Outer Manchuria): In the mid-19th century, as Qing dynasty China was weakened by internal strife and Western imperialist aggression, the Russian Empire imposed a series of unequal treaties that stripped China of vast territories in the northeast. The Treaty of Aigun (1858) and the Convention of Beijing (1860) (concluded in the wake of the Second Opium War) compelled Qing China to cede to Russia what is now known as Outer Manchuria, an area of over 1 million square kilometers, including access to the Sea of Japan and the site of modern Vladivostok)(Denisov 2015). Chinese historiography uniformly regards these treaties as humiliating concessions extracted by force: a strong Tsarist Russia capitalized on China's weakness to "transfer" and occupy Chinese lands under the guise of legality. Indeed, Chinese officials at the time had little choice but to sign, and ever since, these 1858---1860 treaties have been cited as textbook examples of China's exploitation by foreign powers. Chinese maps of national history long showed the surrendered territories with a mournful note(Paine 1996). Even Mao Zedong at one point

remarked that the Soviet Union "owed" China 1.5 million square kilometers taken in czarist times, though he later admitted this was more a statement of historical fact than a genuine irredentist demand(Shen and Julia 2015). The symbolism of these losses remains powerful: places like Vladivostok (Haishenwai) are still occasionally referred to by their Chinese names in historical contexts, and episodes such as the Russian annexation of 1860 are recognized as part of China's national trauma(Billé, Franck, and Caroline 2021). However, as we will see, the CCP's contemporary narrative largely keeps this chapter in the background, especially as China and Russia normalized relations.

Losses to Japan (Taiwan, Diaoyu/Senkaku, and WWII): In contrast, the territories and suffering China endured at the hands of Imperial Japan occupy a central place in its historical narrative. After China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, the Qing court signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895), a devastating agreement that ceded Taiwan and the Penghu Islands to Japan, granted Japan extraterritorial rights and hefty war indemnities, and effectively marked China's eclipse by a rising Japan(Kim 2022). This "highly punitive and humiliating treaty" underscored Qing China's impotence and became a rallying point for Chinese revolutionaries who decried the dynasty's failure to defend the nation(Tian 2022). Japan's victory over China not only "subverted the traditional power hierarchy in East Asia" but also initiated half a century of Japanese encroachment on Chinese sovereignty. After 1895, Japan further grabbed footholds on the mainland, leading to the full-scale Japanese invasion of China in 1937. The eight-year conflict that ensued (the Second Sino-Japanese War, 1937---1945) was catastrophic for China, an estimated 14 million Chinese perished[1], and atrocities like the Nanjing Massacre seared themselves into the national consciousness. The Chinese people's war of resistance against Japan has since been remembered as a defining moment of national unity and suffering(Suganuma 2014; Reilly 2006). Indeed, the anti-Japanese resistance is perhaps the most formative episode in Chinese national memory. To this day, museums, textbooks, and official

[1] The death toll shows a more comprehensive total number of Chinese deaths during the Anti-Japanese War, including soldiers and civilians killed by the Japanese army, as well as those who died due to war and famine.

ceremonies in the People's Republic of China (PRC) vividly commemorate Japanese war crimes and the heroism of Chinese resistance(Zhang and Weatherley 2017; Sairanen 2021; Ogunnoiki 2020).

These two historical trajectories: one involving Russia in the 19th century, the other involving Japan (and by extension Taiwan) into the 20th century, both resulted in loss of Chinese territory and national dignity. Both are, ostensibly, part of the same saga of national humiliation that the CCP pledges to avenge through national rejuvenation. Yet Beijing's stance on each has diverged sharply in practice. As the next section shows, the CCP's official narratives and claims vigorously press some historical grievances (e.g. against Japan, regarding Taiwan and other territories) while setting aside or softening others (e.g. regarding Russia's Far Eastern territories). This selective remembering is not due to lack of historical awareness. Chinese historians and nationalists certainly remember what happened in Aigun and in Shimonoseki alike. Rather, it reflects deliberate choices by the CCP about which past injustices to foreground in service of present goals. Understanding those choices is key to unraveling our research puzzle.

CCP Narratives and the Puzzle of Selective Claims

Under CCP leadership, China's "national rejuvenation" narrative provides the overarching frame through which historical claims are filtered. This narrative casts the CCP as the savior that liberated China from its century of humiliation and is restoring the nation to greatness. It emphasizes themes of righting historical wrongs, reunifying lost territories, and avenging past suffering as moral imperatives for the Chinese nation. Crucially, however, the CCP has been highly selective in determining which historical wrongs to focus on in its state narratives. This selectivity is most apparent in comparing two cases: China's claim to Taiwan and related anti-Japanese grievances versus its stance on territories lost to Russia.

The Case of Taiwan and Japan: Taiwan is portrayed by the CCP as an inalienable

part of China as a holy land of patriotism that must be returned to fulfill national rejuvenation. In official rhetoric, resolving the Taiwan issue is nothing less than a "historic mission" of the Party and a "shared aspiration of all Chinese", tied directly to the glory of national rejuvenation("解决台湾问题,实现祖国统一是中国共产党的历史使命" 2016). Beijing's narratives surrounding Taiwan consistently invoke history: they remind audiences that Taiwan was severed from the motherland in 1895 by Japan's aggression, via the Treaty of Shimonoseki, occupied again by Japan until 1945, and that China to victory in WWII, paving the way for Taiwan's return, only to be thwarted by Cold War divisions. State media and officials frequently stress that the Chinese people will never again tolerate humiliation or partition (China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification 2012). For instance, Chinese Foreign Ministry statements refer to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, closely linked symbolically to Taiwan's fate, as territories that "have belonged to China since ancient times" and were stolen by Japan during the war, implying China is merely restoring historical justice by reclaiming them(National Museum of China n.d.; Taiwan.cn 2021; NetEase News 2013; People's Daily 2012). In domestic propaganda, Japan is unequivocally cast as the villain of modern Chinese history, the enemy state that inflicted untold suffering. This authorized narrative justifies China's assertive stance in East Asian territorial disputes today. It is not surprising, then, that when Japan took actions perceived to challenge China's claims, like the 2012 nationalization of Diaoyu/Senkaku, the CCP actively fanned the flames of public outrage. People's Daily, Global Times, and other state outlets ran editorials recalling Japan's wartime atrocities, and grassroots nationalist groups were tacitly allowed to organize demonstrations (NetEase News 2013). In short, Beijing amplifies the historical memory of anti-Japanese resistance as a strategic resource, bolstering its legitimacy to press territorial claims, such as Taiwan and islands in the East China Sea, and to shore up domestic unity against a historically hated adversary.

The Case of Russian-ceded Territories: In glaring contrast stands China's stance on the territories ceded to Russia in the 1858---1860 treaties, often collectively

referred to in Chinese discourse as parts of the “Outer Northeast” or Outer Manchuria. Despite the profound national humiliation these losses represent, the CCP has deliberately downplayed or omitted them from its current claims. There is no official Chinese demand to “recover” Vladivostok or the Amur region. On the contrary, since the late 20th century China has repeatedly affirmed that it has no territorial disputes with Russia, a position solidified through bilateral agreements. Notably, in 2004, China and Russia signed a boundary agreement settling the last segments of their 4,300-km border, heralding the “complete identification” of the boundary line and declaring the territorial issue closed (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2024). From Jiang Zemin’s tenure onward, each Chinese leader has emphasized that the Sino-Russian border question is officially resolved and that bygones are bygone. Deng Xiaoping set the tone in 1989 when he told Mikhail Gorbachev it was time to “close the past” in Sino-Soviet relations--- acknowledging the treaties were unequal but signaling that China would let historical bygones be bygones for the sake of future friendship(Jiang 2010; Ifeng News 2008). His pragmatism has persisted: even as Chinese textbooks teach about imperialist encroachments, direct criticism of Russia’s historical seizures is muted in mainstream media, especially compared to the vitriol reserved for Japanese imperialism. Instead, the CCP’s narrative portrays Russia primarily as a friendly neighbor and strategic partner in the present (People’s Daily 2023). State propaganda has “consistently portrayed Russia as a trustworthy partner who stands on the side of justice in international affairs,” highlighting WWII alliance and modern cooperation. This narrative silencing of historical grievance was clearly on display during the Vladivostok anniversary incident in 2020. While many Chinese netizens instinctively reacted with anger about Russia’s old “occupation of Chinese territory”, prominent voices associated with state media quickly stepped in to redirect the discourse. Hu Xijin, then editor-in-chief of the CCP’s nationalist tabloid Global Times, publicly cautioned Chinese citizens not to stoke Russophobic sentiment. He warned that certain liberal intellectuals were trying to “incite Russophobic public opinion” by magnifying historical frictions, in order to drive a wedge between China and Russia.

Hu reminded readers that such critiques of Russia play into the hands of Western adversaries and that "neutralizing Russia's historical crimes" is a pragmatic choice for China (Lianhe Zaobao 2022). The message from the CCP was unmistakable: for China's national interest today, Russia's past offenses must be forgiven or forgotten. Indeed, Chinese censors reportedly suppressed some of the more viral anti-Russian posts on Weibo, ensuring that the issue did not spiral into a mass outrage that could disrupt Beijing's close ties with Moscow.

Why does the CCP vehemently insist on undoing Japan's historical violations, even at risk of diplomatic flare-ups, but simultaneously accept or ignore Russia's historical violations? The answer lies in how the CCP balances identity-driven imperatives with realpolitik considerations. Taiwan's reunification and avenging Japanese aggression are integral to the CCP's nationalist legitimacy – core components of the narrative that the Party redeemed China from humiliation. These issues are safely directed at Japan, a rival it can afford to antagonize to some extent. In contrast, revisiting the Russian chapter of China's humiliation does not serve China's current interests: Russia is a powerful nuclear-armed neighbor and a crucial strategic partner in counterbalancing Western pressure. Reopening territorial disputes with Moscow would not only jeopardize that partnership but also undermine the CCP's domestic narrative of a strong China that has already settled its borders. Admitting that the 1858–1860 treaties remain unresolved would imply that successive CCP leaders, even Mao and Deng, "knowingly accepted a disadvantageous deal" and failed to redress it – a potential blow to the Party's infallibility. Thus, the CCP has found it preferable to maintain ambiguity or silence on those losses. In effect, Beijing compartmentalizes history: the "unforgotten" parts, like Japanese aggression are loudly trumpeted and even inflated in public memory, whereas the "inconvenient" parts, like Russian encroachments are put on the back shelf, discussed only in subdued tones or academic contexts. This careful curation allows China to project a consistent stance of upholding historical truth and justice, while pragmatically avoiding conflicts it deems detrimental. As one Chinese nationalist critic astutely

observed, an overly “nearsighted political pragmatism” can slide into “historical nihilism”, implying that Beijing’s restraint toward Russia borders on erasing history (Denisov 2015). Beijing, however, sees it not as erasure but as prioritization or a necessary triage of historical wounds to serve the greater goal of national rejuvenation.

To summarize, the CCP’s narrative strategy is dual-pronged: (1) keep historical wounds fresh and open when they bolster China’s claims or unity, and (2) bandage or even seal those wounds when reopening them would harm China’s current security or development. This strategy generates an inherent tension: how to maintain a credible overall narrative of being the guardian of national history while practicing selective amnesia. The CCP manages this contradiction through tight control of discourse: it monopolizes the telling of history via schools, museums, and media, thereby ensuring that most Chinese citizens internalize the approved version of history as natural. By framing each stance as a logical extension of patriotism, the Party minimizes the appearance of inconsistency. The following section will place this behavior in real material context to examine how CCP utilizes and manipulates these narratives.

Narratives Material: Education and Cultural Productions

Chinese historical narratives are created and spread through three channels. These channels are education, state-controlled media, and culture. These channels work together to share historical information. The narratives have been carefully crafted to emphasize Japanese aggression and downplay Russian transgressions to promote domestic cohesion and support China’s strategic diplomatic goals. This was done for both reasons. (Unger 1993; Blanchard 2007)

Educational Materials

The first methodological approach is a discourse analysis of Chinese junior and

senior high school history textbooks. The history textbooks referenced in this study primarily consist of the recent editions of the People's Education Press (人教版) junior high and high school history textbooks, covering materials from the first year of junior high through the final year of high school[2]. The People's Education Press (PEP) history textbooks are the standardized versions used by nearly all students preparing for national examinations in mainland China. In recent years, two slightly different versions of these textbooks have been circulated; however, the changes between them are minimal, with differences mainly involving structural adjustments rather than substantive content. The corpus of textbooks relevant to foreign history and modern Chinese history includes approximately four volumes at the junior high level and five volumes at the senior high school level. References to specific textbooks will be indicated in citation throughout the analysis.

This study examines how these textbooks portray Japan, Russia, and the Soviet Union, with a focus on themes of aggression, territorial loss, and alliance. In these materials, the Nanjing Massacre and other Japanese war crimes are prominently featured, whereas the "unequal treaties" that ceded territory to Russia are often glossed over or mentioned only briefly (Wang 2012; He 2009).

The rhetorical and structural elements of the texts are also examined, including language, imagery, and the framing of events. Benedict Anderson (1983) emphasizes the role of educational institutions in creating "imagined communities," where common historical narratives sustain a shared national identity. This is consistent with the way China's textbooks promote a sense of victimhood alongside national resilience and strength. Notably, the curriculum's emphasis and omissions reveal much about state priorities: this analysis evaluates major historical events presented and explores the near absence of criticism toward Russia's past actions. By comparing the textbook treatment of Japan and Russia, the study shows how China modulates historical narratives for the sake of ontological security and regime legitimacy.

[2] For more information about the text book, related website is provided: http://www.dzkbw.com/books/rjb/lishi/

Media and Cultural Productions

The second analytical focus is on patriotic films, television dramas, and documentaries. These sources contribute to the transmission of historical narratives, the formation of collective memory, and the shaping of public opinion (Unger 1993). The study looks into how these media and cultural works exaggerate or obscure historical grievances against Japan and Russia, evaluating both their content and context.

In Chinese popular culture, anti-Japanese sentiment is vividly propagated. War films such as The Flowers of War (2011) graphically depict Japanese wartime atrocities, and countless television dramas portray Japanese invaders as brutal villains, fueling anti-Japanese prejudice among viewers. In contrast, Russian territorial conquests or conflicts are rarely depicted on screen. Blanchard (2007) observes that this discrepancy is deliberate; China's grand strategy influences its historical memory, prioritizing narratives that support current diplomatic and strategic objectives while muting those that do not. In effect, war stories that would stoke anger toward Russia are left untold, whereas those that bolster vigilance against Japan are front and center.

Furthermore, this study considers the visual and performative components of cultural narratives. It looks at how TV dramas and films depict Japanese soldiers uniformly as aggressors, and how early PRC films from the 1950s promoted themes of Sino-Soviet friendship and cooperation. According to Mitter (2013), visual narratives help to imprint historical memory by invoking emotions tied to national identity formation. Scenes of Japanese brutality in film, for instance, elicit anger and sorrow that reinforce a sense of past injustice, while depictions of Sino-Russian camaraderie evoke a narrative of solidarity and forward-looking partnership. By analyzing these educational and media discourses, the study illuminates how China selectively reconstructs historical memory to serve its pursuit of ontological security. Chinese history textbooks and curricula place disproportionate emphasis on Japanese aggression while omitting or downplaying Russian encroachments. Similarly, patriotic media and propaganda films amplify Japan's past wrongs but seldom mention

Russia's, adhering to the state's strategic silence on those issues. This selective framing in official discourse is a deliberate strategy: the anti-Japanese narrative fosters domestic unity through shared trauma and indignation, whereas the avoidance of anti-Russian sentiment maintains a stable narrative of friendship with a powerful neighbor (Kaufman 2006; Larson 2015).

In essence, the Chinese Communist Party curates collective memory through what is remembered and what is forgotten to ensure a coherent national identity that aligns with its contemporary policy needs (Subotić 2016; Zarakol 2017). This discourse analysis underscores that China's official remembrance of history is not a neutral recounting of the past, but rather a calibrated narrative instrument, one that amplifies certain historical experiences and muffles others in order to legitimize the state's authority at home and to safeguard its strategic interests abroad.

Selective Representation in Chinese History Textbooks: Japan vs. Russia

Japanese Aggression

Chinese junior and senior high history textbooks depict Japan's wartime actions in starkly condemning terms. Descriptions of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression are saturated with emotionally charged language. Japanese forces are routinely labeled "侵略者" ("invaders") committing "烧杀淫掠，无恶不作" ("burning, killing, looting, and doing every evil"). Accounts of events like the 1931 Mukden Incident and the Nanjing Massacre emphasize Japanese "侵略" (aggression) and atrocities in vivid detail. For example, an 8th-grade textbook describes that after seizing Nanjing in 1937, "日军占领南京后，对南京人民进行了血腥大屠杀，犯下了滔天罪行", stating that Japanese troops perpetrated a "bloody massacre" in Nanjing, committing heinous crimes. The same text enumerates how "日本侵略者" in Northeast China "屠杀无辜人民，掠夺战略资源，推行奴化教育，实施残酷的

殖民统治”, meaning the “Japanese invaders massacred innocent people, plundered resources, imposed slave-like education, and carried out brutal colonial rule”. Such phrases, “屠杀” (massacre), “奴化” (enslavement or “to reduce to slaves”), and “残酷统治” (cruel domination), convey unequivocal moral outrage. The language evokes extreme victimization: under “日军的铁蹄” (“the iron heel of the Japanese army”), “东北 3000 万同胞过着屈辱的亡国奴生活”, i.e. “30 million compatriots in Northeast China lived a humiliating life as conquered slaves”(People’s Education Press (人教版) official 8th Grade Chinese History textbook 2022). This highly charged diction frames Japan’s invasion as an existential evil visited upon China.

Moreover, when covering Japanese aggression the textbooks rarely, if ever, soften the tone. Japanese military actions are consistently described as “侵略战争” (war of aggression) or “蓄谋已久的侵华战争” (“a long-premeditated war of aggression against China”). Even in earlier historical episodes, such as Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s 16th-century invasion of Korea, the textbooks use the word “侵略” , an 8th-grade text notes Japan “派 20 万大军侵略朝鲜…中朝军民取得抗击日本侵略的胜利”, “sent 200,000 troops to invade Korea... and the Chinese-Korean forces won victory resisting Japanese aggression”. In sum, Japanese actions are uniformly cast as aggressive and immoral. This consistent use of pejorative language creates a powerful narrative of Japan as a brutal aggressor inflicting trauma on China.

Positive Terms for Russia/Soviet Union

In stark contrast, references to Russia (Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union) in the same textbooks are couched in far more neutral or even positive terms, especially for the 20th century period. When discussing the Soviet Union’s role in China’s modern history, Chinese textbooks emphasize “合作” (cooperation), “友好” (friendship), and “帮助” (help). For instance, the contribution of the USSR to China’s early Communist movement and war efforts is highlighted with appreciative language. An 8th-grade text notes that in 1920, “在共产国际的帮助下” (“with the help of the

Comintern"), the first Chinese Communist organizations were established. It also credits "苏联和中国共产党的帮助" ("the help of the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party") in the founding of the Whampoa Military Academy in 1924. Similarly, the early People's Republic is shown benefiting from Soviet aid: during the First Five-Year Plan (1953–1957), China built 156 major industrial projects "以苏联帮助兴建的 156 个项目为中心", with the textbook celebrating that sectors like steel, coal, and power saw "快速发展，捷报频传" ("rapid development with victories one after another") thanks to Soviet assistance. These passages frame the USSR as a crucial partner and benefactor in China's development. Terms like "支援" (support) and "援助" (aid) frequently accompany discussions of Sino-Soviet relations in the 1950s. The 9th-grade history text explicitly states: "1949 年中华人民共和国成立后不久，苏联就与中国建立了双边关系，这对新中国是很重要的支持", "Soon after the founding of the PRC in 1949, the Soviet Union established bilateral relations with China, which was very important support for the new China". It goes on to praise the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance ("中苏缔结了《中苏友好同盟互助条约》"), noting it "加强了社会主义阵营的力量" ("strengthened the power of the socialist camp") (People's Education Press (人教版) official 8th Grade Chinese History textbook 2022). In short, Russia/USSR is depicted as a friend and ally of China in much of the narrative, particularly for the 20th century revolutionary and early PRC period. Positive words such as "团结" (solidarity) and "友谊" (friendship) characterize the Sino-Soviet relationship in these contexts.

Selective Emphasis – Japanese Crimes vs. Russian Encroachments

The textbooks devote extensive coverage to Japanese war crimes while glossing over or minimizing Russian/Soviet transgressions against China. Key passages illustrate this asymmetry. For Japan, virtually every infamous atrocity is recounted in depth. The Nanjing Massacre is described with searing detail: "日军占领旅顺后…连续进行了四天大屠杀，杀害了两万多中国人，犯下令人发指的罪行", "After capturing Lushun, the Japanese army carried out a four-day massacre, killing more

than 20,000 Chinese and committing crimes that aroused the indignation of all". The Rape of Nanjing is later characterized as "血腥大屠杀，犯下滔天罪行" ("a blood-soaked massacre, crimes of monstrous enormity"). The textbook narrative also highlights episodes like the bombing of Shanghai, the torture of civilians, and the use of chemical weapons by Japan, ensuring that Japanese aggression is portrayed as barbaric and inhumane in every instance. In addition, earlier incidents such as the 1931 Mukden Incident are framed as Japan "策划" (deliberately plotted) a long-prepared invasion. The 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident (七七事变) is similarly introduced as Japan "制造" (manufactured) a pretext to launch full-scale war . Even Japan's pre-WWII foreign policy is painted in sinister terms; one high school section quotes a 1927 Japanese imperialist proclamation: "欲征服中国，必先征服满蒙;欲征服世界，必先征服中国", "To conquer China, one must first conquer Manchuria and Mongolia; to conquer the world, one must first conquer China"(People's Education Press (人教版) official 8th Grade Chinese History textbook 2022). By repeatedly invoking such aggressive Japanese statements and deeds, the textbooks firmly establish Japan as the predatory antagonist in modern Chinese history.

However, When it comes to Russian or Soviet encroachments on Chinese territory, the narrative is comparatively muted and abbreviated. Chinese losses of territory to Imperial Russia in the 19th century, though significant in scale, receive only brief mention, without the vivid moral condemnation reserved for Japan. For example, the Russian seizure of over 1.5 million square kilometers of Qing dynasty lands through unequal treaties is acknowledged in passing. An 8th-grade text notes that "从 19 世纪 50 年代到 80 年代，俄国强迫清政府签订一系列不平等条约，共割占了中国东北和西北 150 多万平方千米领土", i.e. "from the 1850s to 1880s, Russia forced the Qing government into a series of unequal treaties, cutting off over 1.5 million sq. km of China's northeast and northwest territory". The high school World History Outline textbook similarly states that during the Second Opium War, "俄国借机迫使清政府签订《北京条约》并承认此前签订的《瑷珲条约》，抢占

黑龙江以北、乌苏里江以东 100 余万平方千米的中国土地”, meaning “Russia took the opportunity to coerce the Qing into the Beijing Treaty and recognition of the prior Treaty of Aigun, grabbing over 1 million sq. km. of Chinese land north of the Heilongjiang (Amur) and east of the Ussuri” (Outline of Chinese and World History (Volume 1) 2019). While the language here (“迫使” forced; “抢占” grabbed) is negative, these events are not given the same narrative weight or emotional depth as Japanese invasions. They often appear as one-line facts in a broader discussion of imperialism, without elaborate descriptions of suffering or heroism. There is no accompanying terminology of “屠杀” (massacre) for Russian annexations in the Qing era, in stark contrast to how Japanese atrocities are narrated.

This selective emphasis is further evident in how textbooks treat the Treaty of Aigun (1858) and Treaty of Beijing (1860), which ceded vast Qing territories to Russia. These treaties are mentioned as part of the unequal treaty series, important historically, yet they do not receive dedicated sub-sections or illustrative stories in most textbooks. Instead, the curricular focus for the “Century of Humiliation” tends to spotlight the Opium Wars, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, and the Anglo-French invasion or the Eight-Nation Alliance, while Russia’s role is peripheral. Indeed, the text book completely ignores Russian aggression, focusing on the two Opium Wars, the Sino-Japanese War, and the Eight-Power invasion. In other words, Russian incursions are downplayed relative to other imperialist threats in the narrative of national suffering.

Significant Omissions

The selectivity is most glaring in the outright omissions of certain Russian-related incidents. Notably, the Blagoveshchensk Massacre of 1900 (the Hailanpao Massacre, 海兰泡惨案) is absent from the textbooks reviewed. This episode, during the Boxer Rebellion, saw Russian Cossacks and officials in the Amur region expel and kill thousands of Chinese civilians. Historical records indicate that over 3,000 Chinese

were slaughtered in Blagoveshchensk over the span of a few days in July 1900, with some estimates of Chinese deaths reaching 5,000-7,000 (Paine 1996; Maxwell 2005). Despite its brutality, this atrocity (which Chinese historiography sometimes calls the "Gengzi Russian Disaster", 庚子俄难) is not recounted in standard history textbooks (Gao and Li 2004). Its omission is striking given that massacres by foreign powers are otherwise a major theme in the narrative of national humiliation. The absence suggests a conscious curricular choice to not dwell on Russian-inflicted suffering. Likewise, the Russian (Soviet) occupation of Manchuria in 1945–1946 is largely glossed over. When discussing the end of World War II, the textbooks do acknowledge that the Soviet Union "出兵中国东北" ("dispatched troops to Northeast China") in August 1945 as part of the Allied effort against Japan. However, they do not elaborate on the aftermath, such as widespread Soviet looting of Manchurian industrial assets and resources, or alleged misconduct by Soviet troops, topics well documented by historians but sensitive in a narrative that prefers to remember the USSR as a liberator rather than an occupier. The curriculum swiftly moves to emphasize the Chinese Communist Party's role in victory and nation-building, omitting any negative portrayal of Soviet actions in Manchuria.

Other historical frictions with Russia are also muted or omitted. For example, the textbooks do not highlight Imperial Russia's interference in Xinjiang or Mongolia beyond cursory mentions. An 8th-grade text does briefly recount how in the 1870s "俄国还直接出兵侵占新疆伊犁", "Russia even directly sent troops to occupy the Ili region of Xinjiang", and that China later recovered most of Ili via negotiation (the 1881 Treaty of St. Petersburg) while Russia "仍割占…并索取大量赔款" ("still sliced off over 10,000 sq. km and demanded heavy indemnities") (People's Education Press (人教版) official 8th Grade Chinese History textbook 2022). Yet this episode receives far less emphasis than, say, Japan's seizure of Taiwan or Korea. In sum, Russian territorial aggressions are acknowledged as historical facts but not dramatized or morally underscored in the way Japanese aggression is. The narrative selects which "traumas" to amplify – Japan's invasions and atrocities are a centerpiece of patriotic

education, whereas Russia's historical offenses are comparatively downplayed, and in some cases erased from the popular historical narrative taught in schools.

Evolution Over Time

It should be noted that these patterns are not static – they have evolved as textbooks have been revised, especially in the post-Mao era. Earlier editions of PRC textbooks (e.g. in the 1960s during the Sino-Soviet split) actually used harsher language for Russian imperialism, reflecting contemporary politics. However, current textbooks (2010s-2020s editions) exhibit what one researcher calls a more "neutral" or balanced tone on Russian history, in line with the political rapprochement. During the 1950s-1970s, Chinese textbooks, under Maoist influence, downplayed or omitted Russian imperialist aggression to maintain the fraternal socialist image in the 50s, and then, during the split, included more Marxist-Leninist critique of the USSR, such as labeling revisionism. In the post-Mao reform era, especially after the 1980s, textbook revisions removed much of the anti-Soviet rhetoric as part of a broader depoliticization and in light of improving state relations. One study of Chinese textbooks notes that post-1980s editions started adopting a more "truth-seeking" and neutral stance on Soviet history, avoiding extreme ideological language (Li 2012; Kang 2023; Horesh 2020). By the 2000s and 2010s, references to Russia's past misdeeds are even more subdued. In the latest high school textbooks, Russian invasions are virtually ignored while Japanese invasions are heavily emphasized. This indicates that new editions have further tilted the balance in favor of the political needs of the day, which see Russia as a partner and Japan as a problematic neighbor.

Shifting Portrayals Across Periods

Chinese textbook narratives on Russia have changed markedly depending on the historical period being described – a pattern that often correlates with the state of Sino-Russian relations in those eras. A time-period analysis reveals that the portrayal

of Russia swings from ally to adversary and back, whereas Japan's portrayal remains consistently hostile for the relevant modern period.

1950s--- "Big Brother" and Comrade in Arms: In accounts of the early Cold War era (1950s), textbooks portray the Soviet Union in unequivocally positive terms. This corresponds with the Sino-Soviet Alliance period when China and the USSR were close allies. The narrative highlights cooperation: the signing of the 1950 Sino-Soviet friendship treaty, Soviet aid in China's reconstruction, and joint efforts in the Korean War. Interestingly, textbooks omit Soviet intervention in the Korean War even when it was significant– an 8th-grade lesson on the Korean War does not mentioning the USSR's role, even though Soviet pilots secretly participated. The likely reason is to keep the focus on Chinese and American confrontation, and not complicate the hero narrative of China's "Resist America, Aid Korea" campaign with Soviet involvement. In general, the 1950s are described as an era of friendly cooperation. The textbooks note New China's "一边倒" policy – leaning to one side – meaning aligning with the Soviet bloc. They list the many countries (including the USSR) that established diplomatic ties with the PRC in 1949–50, framing it as China breaking out of isolation with Soviet support. The First Five-Year Plan is another highlight: one textbook lauds how China, "following the example of the Soviet Union," started large-scale industrialization. Anecdotes like Chinese students being sent to study in Moscow, or Soviet experts assisting in China's projects, underscore the friendship. Importantly, any past Russian sins (Tsarist-era land grabs) are not mentioned in this context – the narrative effectively "resets" at 1949, portraying the USSR as a trusted elder brother helping China's socialist cause.

1960s--- From Fraternal Split to Border Clash: In the 1960s, reflecting the Sino-Soviet split, the textbooks' portrayal of the Soviet Union becomes more critical, though still far less visceral than their treatment of Japan. They note the deterioration of relations: ideological disagreements leading to a rift. The tone toward the USSR in this period is one of disappointment and ideological critique rather than emotional outrage. For instance, the narrative might mention Soviet "大国沙文主义"

(great-power chauvinism) or "民族利己主义" (national selfishness) under Nikita Khrushchev, which led to conflicts with China (Outline of Chinese and World History, Volume 2 2019). The culmination of the split – the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict (e.g. the Zhenbao/Damansky Island incident) – is acknowledged in current textbooks, but cautiously. One high school text states that the "中苏关系的破裂" ("breakup of Sino-Soviet relations"), along with Eastern Europe's revolt against Soviet control, "表明…社会主义阵营开始瓦解" ("showed that the socialist camp led by the Soviet Union began to disintegrate") (Outline of Chinese and World History, Volume 2 2019). This phrasing places blame implicitly on Soviet hegemonism for the split, but it stops short of detailing the border war or demonizing the Soviets as imperialists. Notably, earlier Chinese publications during the Cultural Revolution had harshly condemned the Soviet Union as "社会帝国主义" ("social-imperialism") in the context of Zhenbao Island, even equating Soviet aggression with the prior Japanese aggression. However, today's textbooks omit such charged labels. They do not delve into the Sino-Soviet armed clashes in any graphic way; the conflict is a footnote to the narrative of Cold War geopolitics. This restrained treatment aligns with the current official stance of not reopening old wounds with Russia. The 1960s are thus depicted as a tragic fraternal split – the textbooks cite differences in communist ideology and Soviet actions (like withdrawing aid in 1960, etc.), but always in a somewhat clinical tone. The narrative here serves to explain China's subsequent foreign policy shift, such as toward the US in the 1970s, rather than to vilify the USSR.

1970s–1980s--- Absence and Normalization: By the 1970s, Sino-Soviet relations were effectively frozen, and the textbooks correspondingly don't feature much on the Soviet Union in China's story aside from its global role. The focus in Chinese history textbooks for this era often shifts to China's domestic Cultural Revolution and the Nixon visit in 1972, with the USSR appearing mainly as a backdrop of the Cold War. However, the textbooks do mark the eventual normalization of Sino-Soviet relations in the late 1980s. This is usually briefly mentioned in concluding chapters, noting that by 1989 the two countries had restored high-level contacts, ending nearly 30 years of

estrangement. Again, the language is neutral: e.g., “通过多轮谈判，中苏关系走向正常化” (“through multiple rounds of talks, Sino-Soviet relations normalized”). The fraught process, including conditions like resolving the Afghan issue or Vietnam’s withdrawal from Cambodia, is glossed over. By omitting detail, the textbooks avoid assigning blame or rehashing points of contention from that era. This sets the stage for a smoother narrative of friendship in the post-Cold War period.

Influence on Public Perception:

Generations of Chinese students have learned to view Japan primarily through the lens of wartime atrocities and national humiliation, while viewing Russia through a more benign or friendly lens. This education has contributed to a Chinese national identity that includes a strong anti-Japanese sentiment as a core element, whereas anti-Russian sentiment is comparatively muted and not institutionalized. Polling data consistently reflect this disparity: Chinese public opinion toward Japan is overwhelmingly negative, while attitudes toward Russia are largely positive. In a 2019 survey, 84.7% of Chinese respondents expressed an unfavorable impression of Japan, often citing Japan’s historical aggression as the chief reason for distrust. In contrast, recent polls show the Chinese public holds the most favorable views toward Russia among major powers, about 60% of Chinese surveyed had a favorable impression of Russia, a higher favorability than towards any Western country(The Genron NPO 2019). Such differences are not solely due to current events; they are rooted in the historical narratives that Chinese people have been exposed to.

In sum, the selective historical narratives in textbooks serve a dual purpose: internally, they forge a national identity that emphasizes certain grudges and alliances aligning with CCP legitimacy; externally, they underpin Beijing’s diplomatic posture of being tough on Japan and close to Russia. By managing historical memory, the CCP balances its “identity needs” with “interest-based pragmatism” . It amplifies the historical grievance that is still useful for unity and strategic leverage, and it

downplays grievances that would impede current strategic alignments. This strategy has been described as a form of "historical memory manipulation"--- where the state chooses "chosen traumas" to highlight and conversely "forgets" others, in order to maintain what scholars call ontological security for the nation-state while pursuing realpolitik goals.

War Dramas, Documentaries, and China's National Memory Strategy

Heroic Narratives and Themes in War Dramas

Chinese television dramas set during the Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945) have become a prominent cultural genre and a cornerstone of popular historical narrative in China. These series, often termed "抗日剧" (anti-Japanese war dramas), universally portray Chinese characters as brave, patriotic underdogs resisting a ruthless foreign invader. The narratives typically emphasize themes of heroism, sacrifice, and eventual triumph. For example, the blockbuster TV series Drawing Sword (亮剑, 2005) follows a fearless Communist partisan, Li Yunlong, as he battles Japanese forces. Li's character is depicted as tenacious and cunning, exemplifying a "sword spirit" ethos of courage and resilience. The show is replete with stirring scenes, such as Li Yunlong's battalion deploying a captured Italian artillery piece to obliterate enemy tanks, leading to the now-iconic line: "二营长，你他妈的意大利炮呢?!" ("Battalion commander, where's your damn Italian cannon?!"). This dramatic moment became a viral meme in Chinese pop culture, attesting to the show's deep impact on audiences. Drawing Sword not only garnered critical acclaim but also was a commercial smash-upon its CCTV debut, it averaged over 10% nationwide viewership and peaking near 14%, making it the top-rated Chinese TV drama of 2005 ("Why 'Liangjian' Can Remain Popular for So Long?" 2021). It has since been rebroadcast thousands of times, cementing its status as a modern classic of the war drama genre.

Other highly influential series build on similar narrative motifs. No Regrets in This Life (人间正道是沧桑, 2009) is an epic drama spanning 1924-1949, depicting a Chinese family's experience through war and revolution. It showcases key historical events: the first Kuomintang-Communist alliance, the 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the nationwide War of Resistance, and the 1949 founding of the PRC, through its characters' personal struggles. The title itself comes from a Mao Zedong poem ("the righteous path is tortuous"), implying that despite hardships, the Communist revolution is the just path forward. Fittingly, the series was produced as a tribute for the PRC's 60th anniversary and won top domestic awards, and it enjoys a Douban audience rating of 9.1/10 with tens of thousands of reviews. Its popularity reflects how closely the drama's narrative aligns with the CCP's own historical memory – praising inter-party unity against Japan and the eventual victory of the CCP as the culmination of China's struggle. My Regiment, My Regiment (我的团长我的团, 2009) offers a different yet complementary narrative angle. This series follows a ragtag unit of Chinese Nationalist (KMT) soldiers in the forgotten theater of Burma during WWII. Initially underwhelming in tone, it gradually immerses viewers in the desperate plight of ordinary Chinese troops cut off from supply lines and hope. Unlike the more propagandistic dramas, My Regiment eschews bombastic patriotism; there are no invincible superheroes, but rather beleaguered men enduring trauma and forging brotherhood in the face of almost certain death. This unorthodox approach earned the show cult status – it holds an extremely high Douban rating (over 9/10) and is lauded for its realistic portrayal of the war's hardship and the humanity of Chinese soldiers beyond political affiliation. By focusing on the forgotten heroes and the absurdity of war, My Regiment broadened the scope of war dramas, suggesting that the narrative of national resistance includes not just Communist partisans but all Chinese people who bled for the motherland. In contrast, Snow Leopard (雪豹, 2010) achieved popularity by blending patriotic war themes with the tropes of an action-adventure and idol drama. Its protagonist is a suave young officer who evolves into a deadly guerrilla fighting the Japanese. Snow Leopard gained a strong following especially among younger viewers, who were drawn to its fast-paced action and the

charismatic lead actor. Though some critics dismissed it as an "idol anti-Japanese drama" sacrificing historical depth for style, the series still delivered the requisite patriotic messaging of unity and sacrifice. It even spawned a sequel (Snow Leopard: Strong Years), indicating its commercial success. The variety of these productions, from gritty realist epics to crowd-pleasing action pieces, demonstrates the pervasiveness of the War of Resistance narrative in Chinese media. Regardless of style, all these dramas reinforce a core storyline: China, though gravely victimized by Japanese aggression, musters courage, loyalty, and sacrifice to ultimately defeat the invaders, thereby redeeming national honor.

Language, Imagery, and Messaging

The language and imagery employed in these war dramas are carefully crafted to evoke patriotism and moral outrage. Japanese antagonists are almost invariably depicted as brutal caricatures, often referred to as "鬼子" (guǐzi, devils), who commit heinous atrocities against Chinese civilians. On-screen, Japanese troops are shown burning villages, raping and massacring innocents, or engaging in sadistic behavior. This one-dimensional portrayal leaves no doubt about who the "evil" side is; sympathetic or nuanced Japanese characters are exceedingly rare. The intention is didactic: to instill in viewers a visceral understanding of Japan's wartime guilt. For instance, films like The Flowers of War (2011, dir. Zhang Yimou) graphically depict the Nanjing Massacre, including harrowing scenes of violence against women and children, thereby solidifying the image of Japanese soldiers as monstrous villains. Similarly, City of Life and Death (2009) uses black-and-white cinematography to lend a documentary realism to the Nanjing atrocities, hammering home the suffering endured by Chinese people. On the Chinese side, dialogue and plot devices reinforce themes of righteousness, unity, and self-sacrifice. Characters often voice steadfast patriotic sentiments. Slogans about defending the motherland and compatriots, even in the face of impossible odds. Many dramas highlight internal unity: Communists, Nationalists, and civilians putting aside differences to resist the common enemy.

Drawing Sword and No Regrets in This Life, for example, include subplots where former rivals or disparate social groups band together against Japanese forces, underlining the idea of a unified Chinese nation rising from the ashes of discord. In Drawing Sword, Li Yunlong (a Communist officer) is shown cooperating with a KMT general in one battle: a subtle nod to the CCP's official line that the "united front" against Japan was a patriotic necessity. My Regiment, My Regiment goes further by making KMT soldiers the primary heroes, implicitly acknowledging that the Nationalists "did the bulk of the fighting" against Japan, which is a historical reality that the CCP downplayed for decades. By broadening the narrative to all Chinese fighters, the show's messaging fosters a sense of shared national sacrifice rather than focusing solely on party credentials(Watts and McCurry 2011).

At the same time, these dramas often exaggerate or mythologize Chinese prowess to boost national pride. The emergence of so-called "神剧" (shénjù, "divine" dramas) in the 2010s, essentially war dramas with absurdly over-the-top scenes, took this to an extreme. In some notorious examples, Chinese characters perform almost supernatural feats of kung fu against the Japanese. One infamous series, Anti-Japanese Paladins (2011), showed a kungfu master literally tearing a Japanese soldier in half with his bare hands. Such scenes resonated with certain audience segments and proliferated across many shows, as writers sought to outdo each other in showcasing Chinese heroics. The trend of "divine anti-Japanese dramas" became so pronounced that it sparked online memes and satire, as well as concerns from more serious viewers about disrespecting history. The wacky appeal of these dramas, as one media commentary put it, coexists with their darker nationalist subtext: they are "simultaneously serious and unserious", entertaining on the surface, yet rooted in genuine historical animosity and propaganda aims("Going Down the Rabbit Hole of Insane Chinese World War II Dramas" 2016).

Crucially, Chinese war dramas serve propaganda objectives. However fantastical or simplistic, the content consistently drives home the CCP's preferred historical narrative. The message is clear: China was the innocent victim of imperialist

aggression, but through bravery and unity led by the CCP, it overcame humiliation. Even if historical accuracy is sometimes sacrificed, for example, many shows greatly amplify the Communist role in the war while minimizing the Nationalists' contributions that the didactic purpose takes priority. The government prefers dramas that are straightforward in their patriotism over ones that are "artistic" or critically nuanced. In practice, this means heroic melodrama is encouraged, whereas any hint of ambiguity, such as portraying a "good" Japanese person or questioning CCP leadership is discouraged. Notably, when a high-quality but more ambivalent war film like Devils on the Doorstep (2000) dared to humanize a captured Japanese soldier, Chinese authorities banned it, in part because it was too "moderate" and depicted a Japanese character in a friendly light. This incident revealed the limits of acceptable discourse: empathy for the Japanese, or any narrative other than clear-cut victimization and victory, was deemed politically subversive.

Portrayal of Russia and the Soviet Union in Chinese War Narratives

While Japanese villains loom large in Chinese wartime dramas, one notable absence is equally telling: Russians (Soviets) are seldom if ever depicted as antagonists. In the WWII context, this makes historical sense that China and the Soviet Union never directly fought each other during that war. But the omission goes beyond factual combat history; it reflects a deliberate narrative choice. Chinese productions either leave out Russian characters entirely or cast them in sympathetic roles. For instance, in a handful of PRC films from the 1950s, Soviet pilots or advisors appear as friends helping the Chinese fight Japanese invaders. This was the era of the Sino-Soviet alliance, and propaganda films accordingly stressed fraternity with "Big Brother" Soviet Union. Even in recent years, as Chinese media churns out content about WWII, Russians are portrayed positively if at all. An illustrative example is the Russian-made documentary series The Great Patriotic War (伟大的卫国战争, 2010) which CCTV broadcast in China in 2012. This 18-part documentary (originally Velikaya Voyna in Russian) celebrates the Soviet Union's fight against

Nazi Germany, featuring epic battles from Stalingrad to Berlin. Chinese state TV's decision to air it, complete with Chinese narration, effectively inserted the Soviet wartime narrative into Chinese public space. The series duly highlights the Soviet Army's August 1945 campaign against Japan's Kwantung Army in Manchuria, portraying it as a liberation of Chinese territory from fascist occupation. By showcasing Soviet contributions to defeating Japan, the documentary aligned with China's own patriotic narrative and underscored a message of Sino-Russian camaraderie. In the documentary's framing, the USSR and China were allied victors in the anti-fascist war, which shows a stark contrast to how Japanese aggression is depicted. The absence of negative Russian portrayals extends to historical episodes outside WWII as well. Major conflicts or territorial encroachments by Russia in Chinese history, such as the 19th-century seizures of Outer Manchuria or the deadly clash at Zhenbao Island in 1969, are virtually never dramatized on Chinese screens. Unlike the innumerable films about the Opium Wars or the Nanjing Massacre, there are no big-budget TV dramas about the Treaty of Aigun (1858) or the Soviet invasion of Xinjiang (1930s), for example. This silence is a form of narrative omission that serves present-day diplomatic needs. The CCP is keen not to stoke anti-Russian sentiment that could undermine the strategic partnership with Moscow. As a result, cultural productions conscientiously avoid casting Russians as villains in historical settings. Even the brutal Blagoveshchensk Massacre of 1900, when Tsarist authorities drowned and shot thousands of Chinese civilians along the Amur River, is scarcely known to the Chinese public today and never immortalized in popular film or TV.

In contrast, atrocities by Japanese or other Western powers are household stories in China's "national humiliation" narrative. The selective remembrance is stark. Instead of depicting Russians as aggressors, Chinese media often positively highlight Sino-Russian friendship in the context of war. The narrative emphasizes that the Soviet Union was one of the World War II Allies and a contributor to China's ultimate victory over Japan. In addition to importing Russian documentaries, Chinese productions sometimes include brief nods to Soviet assistance. For example, a drama

about the War of Resistance might mention Soviet pilots volunteering in the Chinese Air Force or show Communist leaders seeking refuge in the USSR during tough times, always casting these instances in a fraternal light. Such portrayals reinforce an image of Russia as a benevolent ally. Moreover, modern commemorative events are used to solidify this narrative. In 2015, Xi Jinping invited President Vladimir Putin to Beijing as an honored guest for China's grand military parade marking the 70th anniversary of WWII's end and as an occasion that signaled to the Chinese public that Russia stood with China then and stands with China now, as part of a shared victorious legacy. The contrast in portrayal between Japan and Russia in Chinese cultural memory is thus profound. Japan is cast unambiguously as the villainous Other, the historical enemy that caused China immeasurable suffering. This image is used to unite the populace in remembered trauma and triumph over a common foe. Russia, on the other hand, is largely excluded from the victimizer category; if anything, Russia or the Soviet Union appears as a comrade-in-arms or is simply not mentioned in popular media. This dichotomy is not due to lack of historical grievances – indeed, Imperial Russia seized more Chinese territory than any other power in the 19th century – but rather is a result of strategic narrative management by the CCP. By selectively framing historical enemies and friends, the Party can foster patriotic unity against certain targets while maintaining cordial relations with others. In short, Japan serves as the convenient villain in media narratives, whereas Russia is absolved of past offenses in service of present political goals. This selective memory aligns with China's diplomatic needs: today's ally should not be yesterday's enemy in the stories told to the masses (Kilpatrick 2023).

Cultural Production as a Tool of Memory and Identity

These war dramas and films are not merely entertainment; they function as powerful tools of collective memory shaping(Berry 2010). Through emotionally charged storytelling, vivid imagery of suffering and victory, and repetitive broadcasting, they embed a certain version of history into the national consciousness.

Generations of Chinese viewers have grown up watching heroic resistance dramas on television, internalizing narratives of how "the Chinese people, under CCP leadership, fought bravely and defeated fascist invaders." This contributes directly to what scholars call national identity construction(Mitter 2013). The image of China as a once-victim turned victorious nation is reinforced nightly in living rooms across the country. By focusing obsessively on the "century of humiliation" inflicted by Japan and Western powers, these cultural productions cultivate a shared sense of historical grievance and a resolve that "never again" will China be weak(Callahan 2010; Wang 2012). At the same time, the glossing over of certain other historical traumas like losses to Russia helps maintain a coherent narrative that doesn't complicate the friend-versus-foe dichotomy the CCP prefers to present.

Furthermore, these productions do not exist in isolation; they operate in tandem with education and propaganda. School textbooks, museums, and official commemorations all echo the same themes found in the dramas. For instance, the Chinese government inaugurated a National Memorial Day for the Nanjing Massacre (December 13) with high-profile ceremonies urging citizens to remember the wartime suffering. Films like The Flowers of War or series like Drawing Sword are often referenced in media around such anniversaries, their scenes replayed to amplify public emotion. The synergy is intentional: as part of patriotic education campaigns, students may be assigned to watch these films or write reflections on them, ensuring the cinematic narratives reinforce the textbook lessons. State-controlled media also routinely praises new war drama releases that "carry forward the spirit of resistance," while criticizing those that are seen as trivializing history. Notably, after years of tolerating the more absurd "divine dramas," official outlets like People's Daily began lambasting them around 2013-2015, with editorials titled "Stop making a mockery of war history with absurd anti-Japanese dramas." This suggests the state became wary that overly campy portrayals might undermine the dignity of the narrative they curated.

In terms of public reception, the impact of these cultural productions is

substantial, albeit complex. On one hand, viewership data and popular ratings show genuine enthusiasm for well-made war dramas. Drawing Sword's massive ratings and No Regrets' high user comments scores indicate that audiences find these narratives compelling and emotionally resonant. The proliferation of internet memes and catchphrases from these shows, like the "Italian cannon" line, also shows how deeply they penetrate pop culture. For many Chinese, the heroes of these series , whether fictional like Li Yunlong or composite figures based on real war heroes, has become avatars of national pride. Surveys of young Chinese consistently find the Anti-Japanese War is regarded as the most important historical event of the last century, a sentiment undoubtedly reinforced by the prevalence of these dramas which make that history feel immediate and personal. On the other hand, there is also critical discussion and fatigue. Especially in the 2010s, as ever more outrageous war dramas flooded the airwaves, Chinese netizens and scholars began to satirize the formulaic and ahistorical nature of some shows. Social media saw trending jokes about "divine" dramas" where lone Chinese warriors could defeat whole platoons of Japanese "the eight-year war has been filmed like a superhero vs monsters story" . This pushback grew loud enough that, as noted, the government itself stepped in to recalibrate the messaging. In 2013, the state regulator issued guidelines to rein in implausible plotlines, and in 2018 China's Ministry of Veterans Affairs publicly criticized dramas that "dishonor real veterans by turning war into slapstick." Such criticisms show an awareness that while the intended message is patriotic, overly exaggerated content can backfire by making the war experience seem frivolous(China Daily 2015). Nonetheless, even these critiques operate within the consensus that the war narrative is sacred – the debate is about how to portray it, not whether it should dominate.

In summary, Chinese anti-Japanese war dramas function as a cultural linchpin of national memory and identity. Through their emotionally potent storytelling, they bolster the CCP's narrative of history in which China, under Party leadership, overcame mortal danger and reclaimed its dignity. The CCP's strategy of ontological security to maintain a consistent national self-identity is clearly served by these

productions. They continuously recreate the past in ways that legitimize the present regime and rally the public around shared sentiments of patriotism and vigilant pride. Moreover, by selectively choosing which historical antagonisms to highlight Japan and which to mute or recast Russia. The Party uses culture to manage public sentiment in alignment with its contemporary geopolitical interests. This careful orchestration of memory through media has so far been effective in inculcating a unifying, if simplified, narrative of China's journey from humiliation to rejuvenation. Yet it is a double-edged sword: the more the narrative is narrowed and ossified, the greater the risk that any deviation, whether historical revelation or modern diplomatic shift could trigger public dissonance. For now, however, the interplay of drama, history, and identity in China continues to offer a telling insight into how a ruling party uses the past to secure the present and future. The stories on screen, in essence, are carefully curated stories of the nation itself.

Divergent Narratives: Balancing Identity and Pragmatism under Different Leaders

To fully answer the question why China utilizes different narratives strategies, it is essential to understand that China's treatment of historical grievances toward Japan and Russia has evolved under each generation of Chinese leadership, reflecting a tension between the quest for ontological security and the demands of realpolitik.

Since 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has constructed a foundational narrative of the "Century of Humiliation," in which foreign powers victimized China until the CCP brought about national rebirth (Metcalf 2020). In particular, the CCP has persistently spotlighted Japanese aggression as a core element of national memory, yet it has largely downplayed historical grievances against Russia. This divergence is not due to forgetfulness that Chinese leaders and historiography remember both the brutal Japanese invasion and the vast Qing dynasty territories ceded to Tsarist Russia (Paine 1996; Denisov 2015). Rather, it reflects deliberate calibration by successive

CCP leaders to balance identity needs with geopolitical pragmatism. Key turning points, from the Sino-Soviet split and rapprochement to border settlements and today's strategic entente, illustrate how each generation of leadership from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping has adjusted historical narratives to maintain regime legitimacy and pursue China's shifting foreign policy interests.

Mao Zedong: Revolution, War Memory, and the Sino-Soviet Split

In the early PRC under Mao Zedong, the CCP's narrative emphasized revolutionary unity and socialist brotherhood, which initially tempered historical grievances toward both Japan and the Soviet Union. In the 1950s, Mao leaned on Soviet support for China's reconstruction and the Korean War; accordingly, past Tsarist seizures of Chinese lands were seldom mentioned officially. As one account notes, during the Sino-Soviet honeymoon, both sides "sought to forget historical grievances" for the sake of socialist solidarity (Denisov 2015). Mao even accepted the post-imperial territorial status quo in the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty, effectively shelving any claim to territories lost in the 19th century (Shen and Lovell 2015). Japanese wartime atrocities, while acknowledged, were not heavily propagandized in the 1950s–60s either, in part because Mao's ideology prioritized class struggle over nationalism and because the PRC had not yet staked its legitimacy on memorializing World War II (Callahan 2010). This began to change in the 1960s as Sino-Soviet relations soured. The Sino-Soviet split brought ideological rivalry and border tensions that forced Mao to recalibrate the historical narrative vis-à-vis Moscow. Chinese propaganda during the Cultural Revolution started referring to the Soviet leaders as "new Tsars," invoking memories of Russian expansionism. Incidents along the Sino-Soviet border were cast as continued Russian aggression. Notably, during this same period of estrangement from the USSR, Mao began a strategic opening to the United States and a rapprochement with Japan. In 1972, seeking to counter the Soviet threat, Mao and Zhou Enlai normalized relations with Tokyo. It reflects that China's handling of historical grievances was flexible: it oscillated between emphasizing and

muting past traumas depending on strategic needs. Japan's atrocities were publicly acknowledged but temporarily set aside to serve a diplomatic goal, whereas Russia's historic offenses were highlighted rhetorically but not pursued, to avoid an all around conflict.

From Deng to Hu: Historical Reckoning and Geopolitical Realignment

Under Deng Xiaoping, who took the helm after Mao's death, China's approach to historical grievances grew even more pragmatic. Deng's paramount concern was domestic stability and economic development; to enable this, he sought a peaceful international environment. This led to normalization of relations with the Soviet Union and a generally calm relationship with Japan. Each required adjusting how history was remembered or forgotten. With the Soviet Union, Deng moved decisively to "close the past" in order to mend ties. After nearly three decades of hostility, Deng initiated a thaw culminating in Mikhail Gorbachev's 1989 visit to Beijing. In that meeting, Deng explicitly set aside the question of historical treaties: he acknowledged the 19th-century agreements were unjust, but told Gorbachev that China was willing to put "bygone issues" behind and not let them impede future friendship (Denisov 2015). This marked a definitive suspension of China's historical claim to lost northern territories for the sake of geopolitical pragmatism. Deng's regime correspondingly toned down anti-Russian rhetoric in domestic narratives. Throughout the 1980s, Chinese textbooks and official media began to omit or soften references to Imperial Russia's land grabs, focusing instead on contemporary cooperation (Kang 2023). By burying old grievances, Deng aimed to secure a stable northern border and concentrate on economic reforms. Indeed, Sino-Soviet rapprochement removed a major security threat and opened opportunities for trade and technology exchanges with Moscow (Larson 2015). Deng's balancing act was to reassure the Chinese populace that the CCP had not forgotten past humiliations while nonetheless de-emphasizing those particular humiliations that impeded strategic interests. In contrast, Deng's approach to Japan was more ambivalent. During the late 1970s and

1980s, China and Japan enjoyed relatively warm relations that Japan was a key source of foreign investment and technology for China's modernization. Deng himself visited Japan in 1978 and famously rode a high-speed train, symbolizing forward-looking cooperation. Yet, Deng also presided over the revival of historical consciousness domestically, especially after 1982 when a Japanese textbook incident, alleged whitewashing of war atrocities sparked public outcry in China. Deng allowed limited protests and warned Tokyo to respect historical truth (Reilly 2006). This foreshadowed the "Patriotic Education Campaign" that would intensify under Jiang Zemin in the 1990s, institutionalizing remembrance of Japan's wartime sins (Tian 2022).

Jiang and Hu marked a period of both heightened nationalist education at home and pragmatic resolution of lingering territorial issues abroad. Building on Deng-era negotiations, Jiang Zemin signed a series of border agreements with Russia and newly independent Central Asian states that definitively resolved the centuries-old territorial disputes. By 2004 in Hu Jingtao's leadership, China and Russia signed the final boundary demarcation, settling even small contested islands in the Amur/Ussuri rivers (Maxwell 2005). These agreements were remarkably amicable that China agreed to forego any claim to the vast lands lost in the 1800s, while Russia made minor concessions (such as half of Heixiazi Island) to finalize the border (Maxwell 2005). Jiang paired these practical compromises with public narratives of Sino-Russian friendship. In 1996, he and Boris Yeltsin declared a "strategic partnership of coordination," and in 2001 Jiang and Vladimir Putin signed the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, pledging that neither side had territorial claims on the other (Liu 2001). Such moves required downplaying historical resentment: Jiang's government portrayed Russia as a fellow great power and a former ally in World War II, rather than an imperialist aggressor (Billé and Humphrey 2021).

Meanwhile, Jiang did not hesitate to leverage history against Japan. In 1995 (50th anniversary of WWII's end), Beijing pointedly criticized Tokyo's ambivalence about

its wartime guilt, aligning with broader Asian demands for Japanese apologies. Notably, Jiang himself, during a state visit to Japan in 1998, lectured his hosts on the importance of remembering history---an unusual diplomatic move that reportedly irked the Japanese side but played well to Chinese audiences (Zhang and Weatherley 2017). This indicates Jiang's dual approach: uncompromising historical memory toward Japan, flexible historical amnesia toward Russia. Through the 1990s, China's public opinion of Japan deteriorated, fueled by state narratives, while attitudes toward Russia improved. By 2000, Chinese popular surveys showed far higher hostility toward Japan than toward Russia (Genron NPO 2019). Jiang's balancing of ontological security with pragmatism thus involved a compartmentalization of history. The Century of Humiliation narrative was kept alive and potent in the case of Japan that meeting the ontological need to define an external villain and to validate the CCP as protector of the nation's dignity. In the Russian case, however, that same narrative was largely silenced after normalization; dwelling on Russia's past sins was seen as counterproductive when Russia had become a valuable geopolitical partner (economically for energy, diplomatically as a counterweight to U.S. unipolar power). Significantly, this period set the stage for an enduring pattern: Chinese state media would vigorously condemn any perceived revival of Japanese militarism or denial of history, yet it would quickly censor or tamp down any nationalist fervor directed against Russia.

Xi Jinping: National Rejuvenation and Strategic Entente with Russia

Under President Xi Jinping, who has led China since 2012, the trend of divergent historical narratives has intensified. Xi's signature ideological vision is the "Chinese Dream" of national rejuvenation, which explicitly links China's future greatness with the rectification of past humiliations. In speeches, Xi often cites historical traumas to stir patriotism, vowing that the Chinese nation will never again be bullied. He has doubled down on the commitment to reunify all lost Chinese territories as part of this rejuvenation, most prominently regarding Taiwan, which Xi calls a "historic mission"

to recover (Sacks 2021).

When Japan in recent years took actions viewed as hostile, such as nationalizing the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2012 or increasing security ties with the U.S., the Chinese response has been fierce. Beijing organized mass protests and aggressive naval patrols around the disputed islands, all underpinned by rhetoric about resisting Japanese attempts to deny history and infringe on Chinese sovereignty (Chubb 2024). In short, anti-Japanese sentiment remains a carefully stoked flame in Xi's China, serving as a rallying point for nationalism and regime legitimacy. In stark contrast, Xi has forged an ever-closer strategic partnership with Russia, accompanied by a virtual blackout on negative historical references. Xi and Russia's President Vladimir Putin share a personal rapport and a common strategic outlook---both resent Western dominance and seek to revise aspects of the U.S.-led international order. This convergence has led Beijing to depict China and Russia as best of friends. Xi has hailed the bilateral relationship as entering a "new era" of comprehensive cooperation, even declaring in 2019 that the Sino-Russian partnership was at its "highest level in history" (People's Daily 2023). In 2023, on the eve of a state visit to Moscow, Xi penned an article in Russian media lauding the WWII alliance of China and the Soviet Union and emphasizing historical "friendship" and "cooperation" over any past quarrels (People's Daily 2023). Domestically, under Xi, school textbooks and museums have continued to omit or gloss over the 19th-century Russian seizures of Chinese territory (Kang 2023). The official narrative casts the Sino-Russian relationship as one of long-standing camaraderie, highlighting episodes like Soviet assistance to China in the 1940s or joint victory over fascism, while quietly ignoring Tsarist-era conflicts (Wang 2024). When sensitive historical issues do arise, the state handles them with extreme caution.

Why does Xi's China treat these two neighbors so differently? The answer lies in pragmatic geopolitics. Russia, for all its historical transgressions against China, is today a vital strategic partner. It is a powerful neighbor with shared interests in counterbalancing the United States; it supplies China with energy and advanced

weaponry, and it aligns with China's views on sovereignty and global governance (Larson 2015). Moreover, Russia poses no immediate threat to core Chinese territorial interests – the border is settled, and Moscow supports Beijing on issues like Taiwan and Xinjiang. Thus, keeping Russia as a "friend" is far more valuable to Xi's foreign policy than nursing old wounds. Japan, conversely, remains a strategic rival in East Asia. It is a U.S. treaty ally and has territorial disputes with China (Diaoyu Islands) and an unresolved historical reckoning that fuels mutual distrust. From Beijing's perspective, Tokyo has not fully atoned for its past and continues to challenge Chinese interests (e.g. through Indo-Pacific security initiatives). Additionally, anti-Japanese nationalism within China provides a convenient outlet for domestic anger that might otherwise target the regime, and a justification for military modernization. Therefore, Xi finds it useful to perpetuate a hardline historical narrative against Japan – it bolsters China's ontological security as the avenger of past wrongs and legitimizes CCP rule as the guardian of national dignity (Gries 2004). At the same time, he buries historical grievance toward Russia to avoid undermining a critical partnership.

However, with the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, a large number of netizens once again recalled the lost territory through Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which once again added complexity to this narrative. This conflict gradually became clear with the heated discussions on the Internet about whether to support Russia or Ukraine. The supporters of Ukraine brought up the historical invasion of Chinese territory by Tsarist Russia and accused Russia of endless territorial expansion, while the supporters of Russia believed that the current international situation requires Russia to serve as a bridgehead against the United States and NATO. In this case, the strategic effect of the ontological narrative will be more complicated. Even if most people will support Russia because of their actual national interests, historical grievances will always play an important role in people's mind.

Limitation and Further Exploration

No analysis of China's selective historical memory is complete without considering its limitations and the critical perspectives that challenge its premises. One potential critique, often voiced by Western observers, is that the emphasis on historical grievances in Chinese discourse can be overstated or instrumental. From a European viewpoint, which has seen former enemies achieve reconciliation and move past territorial animosities after World War II, China's sustained focus on century-old humiliations might appear perplexing or even cynical. Critics argue that while the Chinese government invokes territorial disputes and historical victimhood, in practice it has shown willingness to set aside these issues for practical gain, suggesting that ideology and identity may be less decisive than the thesis asserts. For example, Beijing's readiness to resolve almost all land border disputes (settling with 12 out of 14 neighboring countries) and its de facto acceptance of the post-1945 territorial order could imply that nationalistic rhetoric is largely a propaganda tool (Larson 2015). European students might point out that Germany and France, once bitter enemies, built a union forgetting past wars, whereas China's continued harping on past Japanese aggression looks politically convenient. Thus, one limitation of the thesis is the risk of overinterpreting China's narrative as an immutable driver of policy, when in fact Beijing often pragmatically subordinates history to current interests.

Another critique centers on differing conceptions of sovereignty and historical memory in the West and China. Western IR scholars influenced by the Westphalian tradition tend to treat sovereignty and territorial integrity as legal absolutes upheld by international law and norms. In Europe, claims based on historic conquest or loss have largely been delegitimized; borders are accepted as settled, and collective memory is cautiously managed to promote integration (e.g. the European Union's ethos of "never again" focuses on preventing future conflict rather than revanchism). By contrast, China's discourse on sovereignty is deeply inflected by civilizational history and past trauma. The CCP often stresses that certain territories (like Taiwan, Tibet, Diaoyu Islands) have been part of an inseparable Chinese patrimony since

antiquity, framing sovereignty not just as a legal right but as a matter of historical justice and ethnic-national reunification (Zhao 2013). Western observers may find this stance absolutist and see Chinese rhetoric about "sacred territory" as exaggerated. Some European analysts even suggest that Chinese leaders keep issues like the Diaoyu dispute or the memory of WWII alive primarily to shore up nationalism, not because China is truly intent on revising borders (Reilly 2006). In their view, the Chinese public's anti-Japanese sentiment is a product of state propaganda and might be less intense if not constantly reinforced by the CCP. Likewise, they might note that despite loud claims, China has not attempted to reclaim the Russian-held 1.5 million km² lost in the 19th century, indicating that those territorial "core interests" are in reality negotiable or marginal. This skepticism essentially questions whether China's ontological security narrative is genuinely foundational or simply a convenient mobilization myth.

Addressing these critiques requires acknowledging grains of truth while reframing them within China's ontological security needs. It is indeed evident that Chinese leaders exercise agency in historical narratives. The thesis itself demonstrates how Mao, Deng, Jiang, and Xi each modulated the level of nationalist fervor to suit circumstances. This suggests that China's policy is not blindly driven by historical ire; rather, history is a resource that the CCP wields selectively. However, to conclude that territorial issues are therefore unimportant or merely cynical would be a mistake. The emotional resonance of China's historical memory domestically places real constraints on leaders, even if those sentiments have been cultivated by the state. Decades of patriotic education and propaganda have socialized the Chinese populace into a collective memory in which foreign invasions and lost territories are central motifs (Wang 2024). This constitutes China's ontological security framework: a stable self-identity as a rejuvenating great power that must restore honor lost between 1840 and 1949 (Zarakol 2017). Even if the CCP manipulates the narrative, it also must live within it. For instance, while Beijing can mute anti-Russian sentiment, it cannot suddenly recast Imperial Japan as a benign actor or drop the claim to Taiwan without

risking popular backlash and undermining the story that legitimizes its rule (Gries 2004). In this sense, the CCP is "trapped by history" as much as it is empowered by it.

Moreover, the Western vs. Chinese perspective gap means that what Western scholars deem "overstatement" may simply reflect a different valuation of history. European countries did move past many territorial grievances, but often under the umbrella of shared democratic values and security alliances that reframed their identities. China's situation is different: it is a post-colonial, non-Western power whose ruling party stakes its legitimacy on having liberated China from imperialist subjugation (Callahan 2010). While Beijing pragmatically shelves some disputes, it continues to memorialize the general narrative of national humiliation through museums, holidays, and rhetoric. This suggests that memory is not erased, only deferred. In private or unofficial contexts, the Chinese public and scholars still recognize Russia's past encroachments; they are simply taught that those particular wounds were healed by diplomacy, whereas Japan's wounds are still open (Kilpatrick 2023). Even if state media can turn nationalist sentiment on and off, the underlying identity: China as a once-suffering nation that must restore itself is deeply ingrained (Gries 2004).

Finally, Western observers might miss a key nuance: "sovereignty" in Chinese discourse is entwined with questions of national dignity and regime survival in ways that differ from secular Western approaches. For the CCP, every territorial issue (be it Taiwan, islands in the South or East China Sea, or even maps including old frontiers) is linked to the narrative of overcoming humiliation and resisting foreign splits of the motherland. This is why Chinese officials bristle at any suggestion of compromise on sovereignty: it is not only a legal matter but an existential one for identity. European scholars who view some of these issues as minor or resolvable may not fully appreciate that, within China's ontological security framework, consistency of the narrative is paramount. To maintain a "continuous self" in the face of modern challenges, China must be seen, especially by its own people, as unwavering on questions of territorial integrity (Browning and Joenniemi 2016). Thus, Beijing's

stance can seem inflexible or exaggerated to outsiders, but from the inside it is seen as preserving national selfhood.

To conclude, from a Western perspective, some of China's historical angst will continue to seem perplexing or overblown. Yet, as this thesis has shown, those historical narratives are deeply entwined with China's national identity and the CCP's right to rule. Any future shifts, be it a genuine reconciliation with Japan or a fallout with Russia will likewise be accompanied by a recalibration of historical memory. China's past, in essence, remains a live factor in its present, but always channeled through the strategic logic of the moment.

Conclusion

This study has explored how China selectively constructs historical narratives to satisfy its need for ontological security while pragmatically navigating international politics. By emphasizing Japanese wartime atrocities and largely downplaying Russian territorial encroachments, the CCP crafts a coherent national identity narrative that legitimizes its rule and undergirds its foreign policy priorities. Based on ontological security theory, the analysis has shown that historical memory is not merely a passive recounting of past events, but an active instrument of identity maintenance and strategic interest management. Generations of Chinese leadership, from Mao to Xi, have adjusted the treatment of historical grievances to balance the imperatives of national memory with evolving geopolitical needs. Japan's portrayal as a historical enemy continues to mobilize patriotic sentiment and reinforce domestic unity, while Russia's past aggressions are muted to preserve the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Through educational materials, cultural productions, and state-controlled media, the CCP has institutionalized selective remembrance, reinforcing chosen traumas that align with current strategic goals while silencing inconvenient historical episodes. Yet this narrative strategy, while effective for regime consolidation, carries long-term risks. As China's international position evolves and as

historical awareness among its citizens deepens through digital media, inconsistencies in the national story may provoke dissonance or skepticism. Managing these tensions will remain a critical challenge for Chinese leadership seeking to sustain both internal legitimacy and external pragmatism. Ultimately, this case demonstrates how states, particularly those facing complex historical legacies, manipulate the past not only to serve memory but to secure their present and future.

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