

A Literature Review of the Production and Consumption of Anti-Japanese Narratives in Mainland China

From Political Approach to Cultural Approach

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ABSTRACT

The anti-Japanese discourse has undergone a process from amnesia to remembrance in the Chinese public sphere. Based on existing research on the production and consumption of anti-Japanese narratives, this paper reviews three paradigms respectively emphasizing political manipulation in the production process, collective cultural trauma, and relative autonomy of social agents in the reception process. The vector of research on this topic is a process of dialectical negation. Research from the cultural trauma perspective accepts the premise deriving from political manipulation that individuals' traumatic memory about Japanese invaders in Mao's era did not step into the territory of the public sphere but negates the instrumental approach of political manipulation from a cultural sociological perspective. This paper hints that research revealing the hidden resistant power of social agents also negates the fundamental premise held by the two former paradigms. This paper suggests researchers turn from the production to the consumption of anti-Japanese narratives and rely more on oral history as well as ethnographic fieldwork, rather than mainstream literature in the future.

Keywords: *Anti-Japanese narratives, Political manipulation, Cultural trauma, Autonomy of social agents*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognized in academia that the Nanjing Massacre (1937), the iconic traumatic event during the Chinese Resistant War against Japan (1937-1945), has undergone a process from being forgotten to being remembered in mainland China [1-6].

Taking *People's Daily's* representation of the Nanjing Massacre, from 1949 to 1981 for example, only three articles' theme is Nanjing Massacre. Furthermore, these three articles were published in the context of *The Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan* (1960). Using historical accusations as an instrument, *People's Daily* aimed at attacking the imperialist practice and the expanding power of the US in East Asia. In contrast, since 1987, a boom in related articles has been witnessed. Fifty-one articles featured as the Nanjing Massacre were covered on *People's Daily* in a single year, 2000 [2].

Examining different approaches to the answer to the silence and recovery of anti-Japanese memory and narratives, this paper categorizes existing research as political manipulation, collective cultural trauma, and hidden power of social agents.

Political manipulation emphasizes the dominance of the ideological state apparatus and the ruling elites' instrumental purpose. Cultural trauma, however, abandons this instrumental approach and substitutes it with a cultural sociological one.

Holding the relative autonomy of the social agents, the last approach addresses the resistant reception of the audience and the dynamic interaction between state, society, and individual. The implication deriving from this approach undermines the fundamental premise of the former two paradigms that the anti-Japanese narratives once genuinely fade away from people's collective memory.

For future study, this paper calls for a turn from political manipulation to cultural investigation, from focusing on production to reception, and from relying on existing mainstream literature to ethnographic fieldwork.

2. POLITICAL MANIPULATION

The period of Chinese Resistant War against Japan, or the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japan, dating from 1937 to 1945 (It is argued that it should be dated back to the Manchurian Incident in 1931), is a hideous nightmare for millions of Chinese people. Military invasion and atrocious war crimes conducted by Japanese invaders were responsible for unspeakable sorrow and millions of deaths in China (the death toll is still in dispute) [1, 7-9]. However, as political manipulation advocates believe, the traumatic memory of the War vanished in the public sphere in mainland China for a long period. Until the end of the 1980s, out of political motivation, related discourses were continuously produced with the permission and instigation of the party-state.

Based on the historical examination and positive evidence, political manipulation regards the production and consumption of anti-Japanese narratives as a political indoctrination manipulated by the party-state. They argue that the uprising anti-Japanese narratives is to fill the ideological void left by class struggle after market economy reforms. Anti-Japan as an ideological instrument can assist the government to maintain political stability and gain diplomatic leverage. Therefore, the government has implemented systematic patriotic education composed by textbooks, war museums, and patriotic education bases since 1987, which dramatically affects the world view of Chinese people. This paradigm has dominated the academic discussion on this question for a long time.

2.1. *Traumatic Anti-Japanese Memory: from Amnesia to Remembrance*

Witnessing the dramatic alteration of nationalism in China at the turn of the 20th century, historians began to write a history for it [10-12]. Scholars render a full picture of the anti-Japanese narratives production from amnesia to remembrance.

Most political manipulation advocates contend the turn from a heroic narrative to traumatic narrative is to serve the consolidation of the communist regime. As Liu states that the memory of the Nanjing Massacre was forgotten and remembered due to the realistic political need [3].

In the book *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics and Diplomacy*, Gries examines the dynamics of anti-Japanese discourses in a broader narrative of the "Century of Humiliation." Since the founding of the

People's Republic of China, as the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) promoted, the proletarian masses have overthrown the repression imposed by the feudalism of the Qing Dynasty, Western imperialism and the bureaucrat-comprador capital, which set the tone for the "heroic" or "victor" national narrative [12]. In Mao's narrative, the War was branded as a great war of national liberation in which the Chinese people won a complete victory for the first time in nearly a century. Gries contends that the "heroic" or "victor" national narrative initially suited the demands of Communist revolutionaries mobilizing the masses and seizing the popular support from the 1930s to 1940s, and then their nation-building aims from the 1950s to 1970s [12, 13].

However, the reawakened memory of Japanese brutality conducted in the WWII has been transformed into one of the central elements of the "Century of Humiliation" since the 1980s [12, 13]. Coble [5] also notices that the War transformed from invisible history to the front stage in academic and popular culture. The new remembrance of the War after Mao's era is primarily because of the increasing emphasis on nationalism since the communist ideology inherited from Mao's era has been fading away. Coble [5] argues that the narratives of Japanese atrocities, including the Nanjing Massacre, are all "number games" manipulating the feeling of victimization. For example, the official death toll in the War was announced as 9.32 million in Mao's era; however, that number was leveled up to 35 million according to Jiang Zemin, former president of China in 1995 [10]. The conservative estimate of the death toll in the War in Mao's era does not mean the narrative is authentic, but rather, it is to serve the heroic melody and the leadership of the party. The "number games" seem to confirm the phrase "victimization Olympics" coined by Peter Novick and the two agendas of the new victimization after Mao's era revealed by Gries, "quantifying Chinese suffering and presenting the Chinese case to the world" [12, 14].

In addition to maintaining stability in domestic governance, scholars indicate that the Chinese government instigates and controls hatred against Japan intentionally among the public international affairs to gain leverage in diplomatic affairs as well [15, 16].

These studies like Mitter and Coble's literature lay a solid academic foundation for others to study the manipulating practices of the party-state in systematic patriotic education campaigns and new media.

2.2. *Manipulating Practices*

Zhao keenly perceives the subtle transition of the CCP's propaganda after the Tiananmen Incident in 1989. To maintain an ideology legitimating the dominance of the communist regime, the CCP was managing to replace the status of Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong

Thought with performance legitimacy and nationalist legitimacy [17].

Following Zhao's approach, Zheng Wang systematically analyses the themes and contents in the patriotic education campaign. He argues, by selectively remembering and mourning through the patriotic education campaign launched in 1991, the Chinese government has established a full picture of the suffering memory [8, 18, 19]. In essence, this campaign is a more institutional and rational mobilization campaign when compared with those in Mao's era [19]. Its purpose is for the reconstruction of nationalist ideology "in a political system combining weak regime legitimacy, internal disunity, and social unrest" [20].

Regarding the education campaign, scholars conducted quantitative analysis and corpus analysis, etc., especially focusing on the carrier of narrative—textbooks. Gu conducted a corpus analysis on the discursive text about the Nanjing Massacre in mainland China's history textbooks using transitivity and appraisal from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) [21]. He argues that traumatic discourses about the Nanjing Massacre support ideological positionings in mainland China's orthodox narrative of memory. Mehlinger notes that school textbooks are "the modern equivalents of village storytellers." What the storytellers are to the illiterate in the past, is what the textbooks are to the literate in the present. He believes that textbooks have the capacity to install a "uniform, approved, even official version" of what youth "should know about their culture as well as that of other societies" [22].

Besides textbooks, war museums also act as modern storytellers in the nation-state. Although the contents to be highlighted by museums and exhibition spaces changed after the ideological transition, the form is still to promote the post-socialist ideology [23]. Investigating three most iconic Chinese war museums (The Memorial Hall for Victims of the Nanjing Massacre in Nanjing, Unit 731 Museum in Harbin, and Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression in Beijing) and comparing them with Japanese war museums, Hatch maintains that war museums serve as powerful storyteller constructing traumatic memory and shaping collective identity. In the authoritarian state where the party-state dominates the production of historical discourses, he believes, Chinese war museums provide a more coherent and consistent representation of wars compared with Japanese museums [24]. At least in China, the textbooks and war museums share a highly homogenous nature to cultivate the audience.

However, most of the above studies based only on empirical experience without much positive evidence. Wang also indicates the difficulty in evaluating the power of the "Patriotic Education Campaign" [20].

Nonetheless, scholars like Zhou and Wang still offer a quantitative assessment of the systematic propaganda's (especially patriotic education) effect on anti-Japanese sentiment. Even surveys among students, who are prone to be considered critical and less likely to be manipulated, in three elite universities in Mainland China, demonstrate a significant relationship between nationalist propaganda and anti-Japanese sentiment [25].

In the new media era, the realm of media and the internet is also the sphere of influence of the Chinese government [26-29]. For example, Nie investigates the role played by the party-state in patriotic online games based on the war of resistance against Japan, which has been integrated into the national propaganda system [30].

However, these scholars assume only a hegemonic encoding of the recipient exists in mainland China and neglect the relative autonomy of Chinese people. Also, without considering the dynamics of political change in each period enough, they simply regard China as authoritarian or even totalitarian, where no dissent exists.

Daniel Schumacher [31] once appealed, scholars should "pay more attention to non-state actors and their interactions with the state" so that besides "purely state-prescribed forms and contents of an imagined nation," the memory construction of marginalized individuals can be examined. Is the memory of romushain (forced labourer during the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia) and "comfort women" in southeast Asia, the women and children, the atomized commemoration at the level of families, social groups, etc., forgotten in the post-war era, or is it inherited throughout generations? They are all optimal subjects to be researched. Oral history projects and research on a micro level may reveal a subterranean labyrinth underneath the placid surface of national narratives and disenchant the charm of political manipulation.

Not only China, multiple southeast countries have once disguised or have been disguising the historical narrative of Japanese exploitation during the WWII. In consideration of the building and construction of the nation, the suffering of romushain and "comfort women" was shelved too [31, 32]. Scholars may advance their research by doing comparative studies.

3. COLLECTIVE CULTURAL TRAUMA

The emerging theory of cultural trauma in cultural sociology provides a fresh perspective to rethink the topic. Negating political manipulation advocates' instrumental paradigms, J. C. Alexander and Gao Rui synthesize the theory of cultural trauma and the fluctuating anti-Japanese narratives from a cultural sociological perspective. Gao argues that in the context of Mao's communist China, it is the class oppression trauma that seizes the room of the traumatic anti-Japanese memory and other incompatible discourses.

The focus of trauma studies have transformed from the individual level to the collective level and finally to the cultural level. Qian [33] indicates that the theoretical origin of traumatic memory studies can be traced to the notion of theodicy from Max Weber's sociology of religion, in which people crown the meaning of suffering and construct their collective memory.

Jeffery C. Alexander, the founding father of cultural trauma theory, attributes the enlightenment perspective and psychoanalytic perspective to the categorization of lay trauma theory, in which "being traumatized" is seen as an instantaneous and mechanical reaction to the trigger. The former emphasizes the human's rationality in the face of unexpected dramatic change while the latter on the complex traumatic reaction in the unconscious level. Assuming the necessary connection between the traumatic event and being traumatized, he concludes, lay trauma theory has its "naturalistic fallacy" [34, 35].

Negating the "naturalistic fallacy" in the Enlightenment and psychoanalytic approaches to trauma study, Jeffery Alexander et al. establish a framework of cultural trauma theory in the book *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004). They maintain that trauma is a mediated attribution that has no immediate relation with the traumatic event itself. Instead, it is the cultural construction of trauma: coding, weighting, and narrating that ascribe the traumatic connotation to events [34]. Sensing the 20th century is such an epoch when people throughout the world are interacting with traumatization, they emphasize the notion of social performance and narrative, which distributes the significance of our surroundings.

Years later, another book, *Narrating Trauma: On the Impact of Collective Suffering* (2011), co-authored by Jeffery Alexander, Ron Eyerman, et al., further modifies, develops, and expands the theoretical framework of cultural trauma and introduces more case studies [35]. Chinese scholar, Gao Rui, contributes one chapter to this book. Inheriting the analysis in her co-authored article with J. Alexander, and her Ph.D. dissertation, Gao insightfully synthesizes historical memory of the war with the theory of cultural trauma in this book. She indicates that previous research on the geo-political tension in East Asia and the construction of legitimacy in mainland China merely scratches the surface of the problem's intricacy [36, 37]. Only by abandoning the overemphasis on political manipulation and locating the phenomenon into a broader conjuncture of meaning from a cultural perspective, can we reveal the most underlying structure of it. Combing the historical and traumatic narratives, Gao brings forward a compelling argument that the characteristic of collective memory about the War is not a "cultural amnesia" but an ambitious construction of a grand narrative [37, 38]. The narrative of class struggle and the revolutionary romanticism were permeating every corner of discourse in Mao's China.

Incompatible with the trauma of class struggle and the romanticized depiction of the War, which muddled the distinction between nations and the original feature of the War, traumatic memory of war almost had no symbolic space to sustain its position publicly [36-39].

Remarkably, as Gao states, the individual suffering in the War did not transform into collective trauma. However, in her cultural sociological interpretation, she equals "collectivity" with the mainstream memory, the voice of the state, and the visible surface. Like political manipulation advocators, Gao, also assumes the absolute dominance of public discourse and the passive reception of the audiences. She achieves the disenchantment of political determination, but does not throw her sight under the frozen surface.

Adopting J. Alexander's framework of cultural trauma, Huang and Li [2] systematically analyse the construction of trauma of the Nanjing Massacre in their book, *The Texture of Memory: Media, Trauma and the Nanjing Massacre*. Mass media, the internet (online memorial ceremony, Wiki), and Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall jointly construct the cultural trauma of Chinese people. Their positive research once more proves the opposite adaptability of cultural trauma and anti-Japanese memory.

4. HIDDEN POWER OF THE SOCIAL AGENTS

Both political manipulation advocators and cultural sociology advocators, conceptualize their ideas based on the analysis of official literature and commemoration media. These historical texts are useful in discerning the party-state's political intentions and propaganda techniques, as well as geopolitical dynamics in East Asia. However, they cannot explain the complexly intertwining subjective and individual aspects in the production and the reception of the anti-Japanese narratives as a social phenomenon and a communication process. Casting their focus on the social agents in the given structure of Chinese society, some research has shown their resistant power against the mainstream discourses.

The dialectical progression in related research fields may provide some approaches and references for the production and consumption of the anti-Japanese narratives. For example, through complaining (suku) campaigns, a nationwide political movement during the land reform (around 1950-1952), the CCP intended to evoke peasant's class consciousness, by which the party would unite the people, mobilize the mass and overthrow the landlords in rural regions [40-42]. Based on the newly documented oral history and ethnographic field studies at that time, Wu negates the tag of "political discipline and instrumental mobilization" attached to complaining campaigns. By uncovering peasants' perfunctory coping strategy and their indifferent attitude, Wu [43]

demolishes the stereotype produced by the mainstream literature that the complaining campaigns were generally revolutionary and reveals the complex interaction between peasants and political power. Research on other topics, also reveals social agents' interaction with, and even resistance against the dominant discourse under the guise of obedience in Mao's era [44-46].

Accepting Wendy Griswold's understanding of cultural reception as "the social agent's consumption, incorporation, or rejection of cultural objects," Japanese scholar, Fukuoka [47], first turned to the reception study of the history textbooks and historical memory in Japan. Fukuoka's empirical data seriously undermines the assumption held by instrumentalists – in the case of Japan, how students reflect upon history issues does not have a relatively positive relationship with school history textbooks, disclosing the importance of the audiences in the analysis of history education in Japan.

Multitudinous research on nationalism, cross cultural communication and popular culture have noticed the initiative and creativity of "the manipulated" when Chinese are constructing their ambivalent sentiment towards Japan [48-50]. Adopting the framework of hegemony conceptualized by Antonio Gramsci, Fairbrother systematically examines Chinese students' (in mainland China and Hongkong) resistance to the dominant discourses imposed by the education institutions. He keenly perceives the existence of an ongoing struggle between the hegemonic and the counterhegemonic. Students are independent and critical enough to formulate their own national views and national identity [51-53].

Fukuoka and Fairbrother's research inspired Chinese scholars to rethink the negotiated and oppositional decoding of students in mainland China facing patriotic education. Through positive research on high school students and teachers in four Chinese cities, Qian, Xu & Chen find that history education at schools is largely unsuccessful in creating nationalistic attitudes among students. Not only does in-class textbook education have a minor impact on cultivating nationalist sentiment, but extracurricular activities like visiting "patriotic education bases" also have limited results [54]. Their interviews uncover students' critical agency in the face of exposure to historical discourse. When critically selective relaying and reception encounters well-designed selective exposure, the assumed effect of communication out of political manipulating purpose fade away.

On the other hand, another group of social agents seems to wrench themselves free from the control of nationalism manipulation. Driven by national fanaticism, "history activists" in China are challenging the state-party's monopoly of historical interpretation. They established non-governmental organizations, websites to demand recompense for wartime victims, an official commemoration for the war, opposition to economic and

diplomatic collaboration with Japan, and public awareness of traumatic memory in the war [4, 55]. He indicates the risk of these movements from civil society, which could provoke a significant reaction and put the government in an awkward position. For example, it would damage China's efforts to project a responsible image in the international community [56].

It is believed that the CCP's monopoly on "memory policy" control has eroded since the 1980s, particularly in terms of raising public nationalist feeling [57]. Others challenge the widely held belief that the anti-Japanese nationalism in China is largely "state-led," arguing that present manifestations of nationalism are increasingly more "society-driven." The dynamic image of state-society interactions generating dissents of memory at the local level is highlighted in some research to study the political participation of Chinese citizens. These nationalistic "history activists" and their organizations have transformed that popular anti-Japanese movement from the ephemeral burst of public outrage into the enduring "grassroots social movement" detached from the state [58].

Although the power relationship and social context are changing in China, these research reveal the relative autonomy of social agents, the negotiated and renegotiated process, and the complexity of the anti-Japanese nationalism. They provide a cultural approach to investigate this issue by turning from the party-state to the audience. Some studies on Chinese nationalism have employed textual data from non-state media, popular literature, and internet posts, entailing the marginalized voices to be heard [59]. Since the significance of the recipient and the social agents have been unearthed, future studies could pay more attention to those sources.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper reviews existing papers on the production and consumption of the anti-Japanese narratives and classifies them into three dialectically negated paradigms.

Most of the research on the anti-Japanese narratives is conducted around political manipulation. Assuming the overwhelming power of the state-party and the maximum obedience of the social agents, this paradigm contends a judgment that the traumatic anti-Japanese memory has undergone a transaction from marginalization to recurrence in mainland China. Scholars capture the ideological vacuum after the death of Mao and the shaky foundation of the communist regime, especially after the Tiananmen Incident. They argue that it is the state-party that determines the discursive formation in the production and consumption of the anti-Japanese narratives. They reveal the political intention of recapturing anti-Japanese memory and examine specific manipulating practices, including

“patriotic education campaign,” history textbook, war museum, etc.

Adopting the theory of cultural sociology and the theory of cultural trauma, cultural sociologists negate the instrumental interpretation of the amnesia state of the traumatic anti-Japanese narratives held by political manipulation advocates. Scholar creatively contends the class oppression trauma, to which anti-Japanese memory gave way, was so powerful in Mao’s China that it smothers the room of other incompatible discourses.

Last chapter reviews the hidden power of social agents and the dynamic interaction between social agents, social groups, and the state in Chinese context. This paper hints that former paradigms overlook the relative autonomy of the individual and wrongly equate the memory of mainstream media with the collective memory organically composed by every agent’s memory. The social agents as meaning-makers do not permit the signification process connecting production and consumption to be reduced to a mechanical transmission.

The production and consumption of the anti-Japanese narratives in China can be seen as a communication process in which hegemony and counter-hegemony, social structure and social agents, dominant discourse and folk resistance are entangled with each other. In the future, studies may turn from the production to the consumption of anti-Japanese narratives and focus more on the oral history from below and ethnographic studies rather than mere mainstream media. As Chang’s latest study perceives, a new discursive shift has been increasingly salient since Xi Jinping came into power. He argues that the heroic, victor and great narrative are recapturing the territory occupied by national humiliation and national victimization [60]. In the context of the “critical state” of China’s “great rejuvenation,” the new transition would be a new topic to be examined.

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