

# POLICY BRIEF

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## History in China: A tool at the service of the Party narrative

*Valérie Niquet*

*“Who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present, controls the past”*  
*George Orwell, 1984*

Historical issues and the interpretation of the past are often presented as the most important, if not the only, obstacle to any real reconciliation between China and Japan. According to Beijing, it is Japan’s inability to consider its own past actions and express genuine repentance that makes reconciliation almost impossible. This Chinese narrative is often repeated in the Western media, as if geographical distance erases critical attitudes. While in France the legitimate debate on the responsibility of Algerian authorities is a constant reminder of the painful past of the Algerian War, the same media still often contend, as Beijing does, that the responsibility for the tensions between China and Japan lies essentially in Japan’s inability to “apologize” and become more conscious of its imperialist past.

However, while questioning the past and the role of Japan during the first part of the 20th century can be legitimate, it cannot be dissociated from the way the Chinese regime uses history. In the People’s Republic of China, as in all totalitarian regimes, history has a function, that of legitimizing the regime and ensuring its survival. There is no independent history in China, and even less so since Xi Jinping came to power. The only authorized history is the one controlled by the ruling Communist Party. In this type of regime, history is not a science but an instrument, and one of the most significant, of power. In this context, any real debate on history and its teaching as well as criticism thereof is prohibited. Any reconciliation based on joint historical work is by nature impossible in the long run. Positive developments are only cyclical, based on the Chinese Communist Party’s analysis of its current interests. All positive developments are by nature reversible.

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### ***Increased Ideological Control***

Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012 coincided with the increase of the ideological control already noticeable since the early 2000s and the transition from the concept of peaceful emergence (和平崛起) to a more pronounced affirmation of Chinese power. Under Xi Jinping, the cult of personality and thought management have been strengthened in a dual process of legitimizing the Communist Party and its "core," Xi Jinping. Published as early as 2013, Document 9 advocates the unification of thought and the strengthening of propaganda to regain control of society and avoid liberal evolutions that could threaten the regime.<sup>1</sup>

In 2017, an editorial in the *People's Daily* offered an analysis of the "Xi Jinping Thought for a New Era" that focuses on these same objectives of reinforced ideological control, which have characterized the leadership of Xi Jinping since his arrival in power. For Xi Jinping, ideological struggle is worsening and, to avoid a risk of collapse like that of the USSR, the control and "orientation" of public opinion, including on the Internet, must be reinforced.<sup>2</sup>

This stress on ideological control affects all sectors: education, culture, film production, the Internet and social networks and, of course, social science, research and history. Released in 2021, the historical film "The Battle at Lake Changjin" (长津湖), which recounts the victory of "Chinese volunteers" against an American unit during the Korean War, is a good example of the use of manipulated history as an ideological tool.

This ideological control, which includes social networks, preceded Xi Jinping's rise to

power with an emphasis on "patriotic education campaigns" since the early 1990s, but it has increased since then, gradually closing off all access to outside sources of information and critical thinking. This has been further enhanced by the Covid-19 pandemic and the closing of borders that prohibit travel and exchanges among academics and experts.

This increased ideological control reflects a sense of vulnerability behind the regime's façade of power and self-confidence. China's reputation on the international stage has deteriorated, especially in the major liberal democracies where the measure of public opinion is reliable. The low degree of support for the Olympics is a testament to this: while in 2008 the Beijing Olympics were seen globally as a positive event, in 2021 calls for a boycott because of the regime's human rights abuses multiplied. For China, the fear of "regime change" and "color revolutions" has not disappeared. In 2022, it was awakened by the riots that broke out for several days in Kazakhstan and the unexpected nature of these riots.

One of Xi Jinping's strategies has been to strengthen the ideological purity of the Communist Party and its cadres by fighting corruption. Reaching millions of Communist Party members, these anti-corruption campaigns have also allowed Xi Jinping to impose his authority over the party apparatus at all levels. However, these campaigns - which have also affected powerful economic interests - have generated discontent that also threatens the regime from within, even if the critics do not speak out openly.

Under these conditions, constantly reaffirming the supremacy of the Communist

1 "Document 9, A China File Translation," *Chinafile.com*, November 8, 2013, <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>

2 "习近平决胜全面建成小康社会夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利" (Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in all Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era), *人民日报 (People's Daily)*, October 28, 2017.

Party and its leadership at all levels, from ideology to economics, has become the new mantra: only the Communist Party can defend China’s honor, its national interests and accomplish the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” as Xi Jinping proclaimed to the Party in 2021.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, China, following the Communist Party, must assert itself as “rich and powerful” (富强) according to the slogan that was also the slogan of the Legalists (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) and then of imperial Japan from the Meiji era to 1945.

In this agenda, history, and the control of ideology at the heart of “historical science” in totalitarian regimes, plays a primary role in imposing and perpetuating the authority of the Communist Party. The text of the “Resolution of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party Over the Past Century” of November 16, 2021 reflects these principles. The role of the Party is “to lead the Chinese people united in unremitting efforts to realize the Chinese dream of great rejuvenation.” The permanent nature of the struggle (reminiscent of Mao Zedong’s concept of permanent revolution) in turn guarantees a constant mobilization of opinion that prohibits any contest. The resolution also states that “our faith in Marxism, the great ideal of communism and the common ideal of socialism with Chinese characteristics, is our source of power.”<sup>4</sup>

***Chinese values versus liberal values***

For many analysts in China, even those who

have recently expressed concern about the overly “nationalistic” orientation of Chinese youth, the liberal ideology represented by the United States is losing its appeal and influence, particularly in developing countries. Attempting to theorize this ideological shift, Yan Xuetong, a Communist Party theorist close to the government, suggests that “Chinese values” are imposing their norms based on a mixture of Marxist principles, economic pragmatism and revisited Confucian principles. Whatever the content of the discourse, the main point is to impose thought control, control of the historical narrative and autocratic principles as more legitimate than the liberal democratic values whose universal character the Chinese regime contests.<sup>5</sup>

Document 9, the name given to a directive from the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued in April 2013, outlines the “seven political perils” that the Party must face in order to remain in power. Among these “seven political perils” are all that constitutes the basis of liberal democracy: constitutionalism, civil society, universal values, a “Western” vision of press freedom and, above all, what the Communist Party denounces as a “nihilistic vision” of history.<sup>6</sup> The watchword of the 2013 directive is to call for a more committed fight against “external” ideas that threaten the one-party principle that governs China, and the rectification of history, in the service of the party, occupies an essential place in the Communist Party’s control strategy.

***What is the purpose of history?***

One of the most important points is, through

3 “In 2035, China as a Great Modern Socialist Country and the Chinese Nation will Stand Taller and Prouder Among the Nations of the World”.  
 4 [https://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latestreleases/202111/16/content\\_WS6193a935c6d0df57f98e50b0.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latestreleases/202111/16/content_WS6193a935c6d0df57f98e50b0.html)  
 5 Yan Xuetong, “Chinese Values Versus Liberalism, What Ideology will Shape the International Normative Order,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 11, issue 1, Spring 2018, 8 February 2018.  
 6 “Document 9, A China File Translation,” *Chinafile.com*, 8 November 2013, <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>

the control of the historical narrative, to strengthen the image of the Communist Party and its legitimacy by using a rewritten past to serve the present.

According to Document 9, “historical nihilism,” which relativizes or criticizes the role of the Party and its representatives by “distorting history,” is denounced as helping to undermine the dominance of the Communist Party and its leading role in founding the new China. The only authorized historical narrative is the one that corresponds to the official discourse of the Communist Party, which cannot be challenged. History is an instrument, serving the interests of the Communist Party and the official narrative, and this is especially true of the Second World War and relations with Japan.

In November 2021, the Central Committee of the Communist Party headed by Xi Jinping adopted a resolution on the history of the Communist Party, the third in the Party’s history after those of Mao Zedong (1945) and Deng Xiaoping (1981).<sup>7</sup> The resolution recalls that the Chinese nation is “a great nation with a history of more than 5,000 years” and that the Communist Party, which unites and leads the people, is the culmination of this history. In the 20th century, the rise to glory of the Communist Party is presented as the conclusion of a process that includes the Northern Expedition (under the leadership of the Kuomintang), the “war against Japan’s aggression”, and the “war of liberation” (civil war) until the victory of the CCP and the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China on October 1, 1949.

History is thus an essential instrument for ensuring this domination of the Communist Party and has been constantly mobilized to re-legitimize the Party under many tensions. The fundamental task defined by the resolution on the history of the Communist Party is to

preserve national security and “social stability”. The “totalitarian” conception of national security is indeed very broad, and includes military, political, economic, cultural, social, technological, ecological and other dimensions. The control of history, at the intersection of culture, ideology and politics, is at the heart of this mission.

Thus, after the repression of the democratic movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and then the collapse of the Soviet Union, which demonstrated that communist regimes could disappear and that the “direction of history” could be reversed, contrary to what Marxist-Leninist theory proclaims, Deng Xiaoping inaugurated an ideological revival based on history with the political and ideological education movement.

In the 1970s, after Mao Zedong’s death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, China had experienced a kind of “boom” in more independent historical research in areas such as urban history, social history, women’s status, and 20th century family history that were strongly inspired by the West. After 1992, though, the acceleration of economic reforms and the encouragement of personal enrichment with the slogan “to get rich is glorious” (致富光荣) led to a collapse of the last “moral” values on which the Communist Party was trying to rely, including the emergence of massive corruption.

Again the need to strengthen the legitimacy of the Communist Party by drawing on history and national studies (国 学 ) was expressed through patriotic education campaigns. The first directive on patriotic education was issued in 1994. The aim was to strengthen national consciousness, cohesion, and a sense of national pride. It was a question of redirecting the frustrations against the authorities that had been expressed in the Tiananmen Square

<sup>7</sup> “Xi’s Explanation of Resolution on Major Achievements and Historical Experience of CCP Over Past Century,” 16-11-2021, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/2021-11/16/content\\_77876030.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/2021-11/16/content_77876030.htm)



demonstrations against external enemies and reminders of a painful past under the theme of the “century of humiliation”.<sup>8</sup> This theme of humiliation was new; under Mao Zedong, on the contrary, any victimization was rejected, the responsibility for the sufferings of the past was attributed to feudalism and the impotence of the Kuomintang, the Communist Party only celebrating victories.<sup>9</sup>

For the Communist Party in search of a new source of legitimacy, the manipulation of history became the hard core of controlling the national narrative beginning in the early 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Since 2012, when he became General Secretary of the Communist Party, Xi Jinping has accelerated and deepened this movement, which aims to bolster the argument that the Communist Party is the “savior of the nation,” its only legitimate leader. At the same time, the discourse has moved away from the theme of humiliation to emphasize the assertion of resurgent Chinese power.

Xi Jinping’s objective in launching almost permanent anti-corruption campaigns was to eliminate rival factions as well as to consolidate the power of the Party in an increasingly uncertain world. Thus, beyond the anti-corruption campaigns, the control of public opinion and the economy, history is at the heart of the process of glorifying the Communist Party, consolidating national identity around the party, and justifying the one-party system.

In 2019, the Central Committee issued a new directive, “Outline on Implementing Patriotic Education in a New Era,”<sup>11</sup> which extends the first document of 1994. As in 1994, in this program aimed at realizing the “Chinese dream of a great renaissance,” the place of history is central to both mobilizing youth and justifying the power of the Communist Party. Loyalty to the Communist Party is the central point for judging and evaluating the degree of patriotism.

In an address made on the occasion of the establishment of the Institute of History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Xi Jinping again emphasized the role of historical science “with Chinese characteristics,” which should be “a mirror that should reflect the positive contributions of the party to the country’s development.”<sup>12</sup> As Huang Kunming, in charge of propaganda, stated at a symposium on Chinese history “for a new era” held in 2019, the key principles of historical science should be “adherence to a just political guiding principle and contribution to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”

Ideological control of historical studies in China has thus increased dramatically, in a continuum worsening from the 1990s to the 2010s and, as long as Xi Jinping and the more radical factions remain in power in China, this movement is likely to continue, prohibiting any long-term progress on resolving historical issues with Japan.

8 Wing Kuang, “How China Patriotic Education Became One of the Longest Successful Propaganda Campaigns,” 5 July 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-05/ccp-patriotic-education-young-people-in-australia/100260298>

9 Denton, Kirk A. “Heroic Resistance and Victims of Atrocity: Negotiating the Memory of Japanese Imperialism in Chinese Museums”, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 1 October 2007, vol. 5, Issue 10, <https://apjpf.org/-Kirk-A.-Denton/2547/article.html>

10 Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memories in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012.

11 新时代爱国主义教育实施纲要, (*Presentation of Patriotic Education for a New Era*), 人民网, 12-11-2019, [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-11/12/content\\_5451352.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-11/12/content_5451352.htm)

12 习近平致信祝贺中国社会科学院中国历史研究院成立 (*Xi Jinping Sends a Letter of Congratulations on the Establishment of the Chinese Institute of History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, 03-01-2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2019-01/03/c\\_1123942643.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2019-01/03/c_1123942643.htm)

### ***Japan at the heart of the historical discourse of legitimization of the Communist Party***

Whether in the period when China posed as a victim or in the current period, Japan occupies a central place in the Party's narrative of national assertion based on the manipulation of history. A former tributary state according to Beijing, Japan defeated the Qing Empire in 1895, a particularly humiliating defeat. Today a "small country", Japan remains the world's third economic power and its democratic model fully integrates it into the concert of major democratic powers. The war against Japan between 1937 to 1945 was also overexploited by the Communist Party, despite the minor role played by the Communist forces compared to the Nationalist government, to strengthen the position of Communist China in the war against fascism and thus increase the legitimacy of the CCP on the global stage. According to the resolution on the history of the Communist Party issued in 2021, "the Communist Party has acted for the peace and development of all mankind by opening the world's main battlefield in the anti-fascist war."<sup>13</sup> This was also the main objective of the grand parade held in Beijing on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the victory on September 3, 2015.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Japan is a key target of the historical ideological discourse of the Communist Party in more than one way. Ideologically, Japan poses a challenge to the Chinese regime, which for a time relied on the concept of "Asian values" to better oppose the Western world. With Japan today putting forward the concept of "shared values" as the core of its external strategy for a

Free and Open Indo-Pacific, this challenge has been considerably strengthened.

Strategically, Japan is also the closest ally of the United States in Asia, and it is on Japanese territory that the most important US bases in Asia are located, bases that play a leading role in deterring Chinese destabilizing actions in the Taiwan Strait. This dimension was reinforced by Japan's new defense laws in 2015.

Finally, Japan can be used to help rekindle the nationalist flame in China by putting pressure on Japan with constant activities by Chinese coast guard vessels around the Senkaku Islands. For Beijing, anti-Japanese nationalist sentiment, sustained by a historical discourse that in reality does not wish to see the historical tensions with Tokyo resolved, also allows the consolidation of united front operations aimed at uniting all Chinese, wherever they may be, overseas or in Taiwan, around the nationalist themes defended by the Communist Party.

By the end of the 1980s, Chinese school textbooks were once again emphasizing Japan's crimes during the war.<sup>15</sup> In addition, a society for the history of the anti-Japanese war was founded in 1991, its mission being, among other things, to denounce Japanese revisionism" and to criticize Japan's "historiographical relativism".<sup>16</sup>

In 2015, 70 years after the end of World War II, two new holidays were introduced in China: September 3 to commemorate "Victory Day of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression", and September 13 as a day of remembrance for the victims of the "Nanjing Massacre".<sup>17</sup> Instead of improving relations,

13 中国共产党的历史使命与行动价值, op.cit.

14 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-34125418>

15 [https://ir.cas.lehigh.edu/sites/ir.cas2.lehigh.edu/files/YinanHe\\_HistoryChineseNationalism.pdf](https://ir.cas.lehigh.edu/sites/ir.cas2.lehigh.edu/files/YinanHe_HistoryChineseNationalism.pdf)

16 Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memories in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012.

17 Alexandre Dor, "China's WWII Remembrance: Patriotic Education in Action," *The Diplomat*, 15-08-2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/08/chinas-ww2-remembrance-patriotic-education-in-action/>

China's historical posturing focused on Japan is causing them to deteriorate. Other examples include the construction or renovation of museums or memorials related to the war that accelerated from the 1990s.

Thus, it is an illusion to consider that a true resolution of the historical conflicts between the People's Republic of China and Japan can be achieved. The constant reminder of Japan's "past crimes" is too useful for the ruling Communist Party in Beijing, the sole controller of the historical narrative and history education, to be abandoned. Only a change of regime in Beijing could bring about a real change towards a more dispassionate debate on historical issues. This is the evolution undergone by all Asian countries (except South Korea), which, despite the sufferings endured during the Second World War, have chosen to consider post-war Japan as a partner and no longer as an "eternal enemy".