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## **Influence of Chinese historical memory of the Sino-Japanese War 1937–1945 on current relations between China and Japan**

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**Abstract.** *Historical memory of the nation is a set of memories about historical events that passes from generation to generation. For the Chinese people the events of the Sino-Japanese War 1937–1945 are of particular significance, just the same as for the Russians is our memory of the Great Patriotic War. Nevertheless, the historical memory of the Chinese people about those events was controlled and changed by the Communist Party. There was even a period when the war was completely forgotten. In this paper, the evolution of the historical memory of the Chinese about the war was studied, so the periods of its changes were identified. These changes affected on the attitude of the Chinese towards the Japanese: by the end of the 1990s, the number of anti-Japanese speeches in China reached a peak, so since 2005 Beijing decided to change its policy. There are a number of studies about the historical memory's impact on Sino-Japanese relations written by the authors, who conclude that the historical memory effects negatively on the relations between China and Japan. The analysis in this article reveals areas where the influence of historical memory is practically absent. Firstly, these are trade relations between the countries, which are only getting stronger every year. Secondly, even in resolving controversial issues about Senkaku Islands and during the escalation of the Taiwan crisis, China did not appeal to the historical memory of the 1937–1945. Thirdly, some specific provocations of Japan were also sometimes ignored by the Communist Party (the Chinese people, however, pay attention to all of these incidents). Thus, it can be noted that the historical memory is an important aspect to shape the PRC's policy, but it is not a determining factor in Sino-Japanese relations.*

**Keywords:** Historical Memory; People's Republic of China; Japan; Sino-Japanese War; Sino-Japanese Relations; Shinzo Abe; Yasukuni Shrine; Japan–China Trade; Taiwan

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## Влияние исторической памяти китайцев о Китайско-японской войне 1937–1945 гг. на современные отношения между Китаем и Японией

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**Аннотация.** Историческая память – это набор передаваемых из поколения в поколение воспоминаний об исторических событиях. Китайско-японская война 1937–1945 гг. имеет особую значимость для китайцев так же, как и для россиян – память о Великой отечественной войне. Тем не менее на протяжении десятилетий историческая память народа о событиях тех лет контролировалась и менялась Коммунистической партией, был даже период, когда война была всецело предана забвению. В настоящей работе была исследована эволюция исторической памяти китайцев о войне, а также были обозначены периоды ее изменений, которые сказывались на отношении китайцев к японцам: к концу 1990-х количество антияпонских выступлений достигло пика, поэтому с 2005 г. Пекин решил изменить свою политику.

Существует ряд исследований, в которых авторы оценивают влияние исторической памяти о войне 1937–1945 гг. на китайско-японские отношения и приходят к выводу о том, что она омрачает отношения между двумя государствами, концентрируясь на негативных аспектах отношений КНР и Японии. В ходе анализа были выявлены области, влияние исторической памяти на которые практически отсутствует. Во-первых, это торговые отношения между странами, которые только укрепляются с каждым годом. Во-вторых, даже в решении спорных вопросов об о. Сенкаку и в ходе эскалации Тайваньского кризиса Китай не апеллировал исторической памятью о войне. В-третьих, некоторые конкретные провокации Японии также порой оставались без внимания Коммунистической партией (народ тем не менее ничего не оставляет без внимания). Таким образом, можно отметить, что историческая память действительно является основополагающим аспектом в формировании политики страны, однако не является определяющим фактором в Китайско-японских отношениях.

**Ключевые слова:** историческая память; Китайская Народная Республика; Япония; Китайско-японская война; китайско-японские отношения; торговля Китая и Японии; храм Ясукуни; Синдзо Абэ; Тайвань

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*Introduction.* The Memory was first considered as a sociological phenomenon in 1925 by the Frenchman Maurice Halbwachs in “The Social

Framework of Memory” [1]. Later the sociologist continued to study this concept and in 1950 wrote the article “Historical Memory”, which described the idea of the collective memory for the first time ever. The author concluded that each person has two types of memory that are closely related: the first one is his own memory (the internal one), and the second is the memory of his environment (the external one) [2].

The collective memory can be represented both in a narrow sense as the memories of parents and grandparents that are passed on their children, and in a broader sense as the memory of an entire nation. This article will examine the historical memory of the Chinese about the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–1945. It is an important stage in the history of the country, which influenced the further development of China and the formation of international relations in Southeast Asia [3, p. 526].

Japan’s claims to the sovereignty of China began long before 1937, when a full-scale invasion of Japanese troops into Chinese territory began after the incident on the Marco Polo Bridge (aka the Lugojiao Incident). Although some Chinese researchers and politicians consider the “Events of September, 18<sup>th</sup>” to be a starting point of the War in 1931.

The war is divided into 4 periods [3, p. 531]:

1. July 1937 – October 1938;
2. November 1938 – December 1941;
3. December 1941 – August 1945;
4. August 1945 – September 1945.

During the first stage Japan waged an aggressive conquest war. China could not offer worthy resistance, so different cities, including Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Nanjing, Wuhan, Guangzhou, were occupied in the first months of the war. The Japanese planned the victory to be fast, but the Guomindang (GMD) government refused to capitulate. Then the Empire switched to the attrition tactic, it was the second period of the war. The attacks were halted, only a couple of operations were carried out. In 1941, both Japan and China joined the World War II and the active hostilities in China resumed in 1941, 1942 and 1944. Zhengzhou, Luoyang, Changsha, Guilin were also occupied by the Japanese, but the GMD still refused to surrender. The fourth period is the shortest, but no less important, when Japan finally capitulated and the bloody for each state Second World War ended [3, p. 531–535].

Each country had their time to comprehend the war. Veterans in the USSR, USA, Germany had a sort of public authority back in their countries, they actively recorded and analyzed all the events of the past years in their memoirs. The situation in China was completely different. The Chinese government consigned to oblivion everything that happened during the War, so the genre of military memoirs was absent there. While China remained silent, Japan systematically deleted everything mentioning of its war crimes [4].

Right after the World War II ended a Civil War started in China and lasted for 4 years (1945–1949). China was divided into two parts and actually had two governments. Both the GMD Party led by Chiang Kai-shek, and the Communist Party led by Mao Zedong said they did not want retributions for the crimes of Japanese soldiers. In 1954, after the formation of the People's Republic of China, tribunals were held in Shenyang and Taiyuan, where only 45 out of 1108 prisoners of war were convicted, the rest were allowed to return to Japan. But in 1964 even these 45 convicts were repatriated. In the same year, Zhou Enlai said that the Sino-Japanese relations of the past 60 years should be forgotten, since they have no weight against friendship between countries in two thousand years, therefore there is no need to sow enmity and pass hatred on to future generations [5, p. 464].

A lot of Western authors begin to analyze historical memory and its evolution from the moment of the PRC founding in 1949. There are 4 stages in of the evolution of the Chinese people's historical memory [5, p. 465]:

1. 1949–1982 – was a period when Sino-Japanese War was almost “forgotten”.
2. Since the mid-1980s the government started a new educating campaign that brought all the wartime memories back.
3. By the end of the 1990s this campaign led to an increase of anti-Japanese protests.
4. Since 2005 they implement a new policy of control.

In 1972, negotiations were held between China and Japan in order to normalize their relations, therefore, 2022 marks the 50th anniversary of the Sino-Japanese relations' stabilization. That year Mao Zedong refused Japanese post-war reparations, but in 1978 Deng Xiaoping demanded them from Tokyo again. So, in 1979–1983 Japan paid China 1.4 billion dollars, and in 1984–1989 they paid 2.1 billion dollars. In the 1990s the payment of compensation was

suspended due to China's nuclear tests, and in the 2000s it was completely discontinued.

Since the 1980s a lot of films, TV-shows, books and articles about the Sino-Japanese War were released. This was primarily due to the Deng Xiaoping's Chinese economic reform. Thus, we see that the historical memory of the Chinese people was corrected and changed by the Chinese Communist Party [5, p. 469]: after the PRC was found it was not "allowed" to talk about the War with Japan, and after the Mao Zedong's death this theme became relevant.

During the 1980s the PRC and the USSR relations got better, same as Japan became closer to the USA. Beijing was not satisfied with the Tokyo's and Washington's support of Taiwan. By that time China's benevolent amnesia was over and the Communist Party started a patriotic education campaign. They provided the nation with the information of all the crimes that took place in 1931–1945.

By the end of the XX century several memorial complexes were opened in China: in 1984 one was opened in Nanjing (dedicated to the Nanjing massacre that happened in December 1937), in 1987 and in 1992 two more complexes were opened in Beijing and in Shenyang. Here we need to say that during the previous decades a few memorial complexes were also opened, but the main idea of them was not to show the confrontation between the two countries, but to show the heroism of the communists. Museums and the complexes of the 80-90s have a completely different character, they are not about the communists, but about whole nation's suffering from the Japanese soldiers [5, p. 471].

In the 1990s China's government did not mean to stimulate anti-Japanese movements, they intended to gain nation's support for the party in any way. And it happened that revealing all those committed during the War crimes was a working method. At the turn of the century, many activists began to demand from Japan an apology and compensation for everything that happened during the Sino-Japanese War. They also opposed China's economic cooperation with Japan. So, in 2000, it was proposed to make two days of mourning: September 18<sup>th</sup> (on this day in 1931, Japan began its aggressive activities in China) and December 13<sup>th</sup> (the day when Japanese troops entered Nanjing in 1937 and started Nanjing massacre). This proposal was discussed at meetings of the NPC, but the bill was not approved [5, p. 474].

Thus, at the late 1990s there was a rapid growth of anti-Japanese sentiments in China, which happened partly at the will of the CCP. As long as they decided to unite people against one enemy via remembering the crimes of Japanese soldiers, they thereby rallied the nation and increased the people's loyalty to the government.

*Results of the study and their discussion.* From 2002 to 2012 Hu Jintao was the leader of the People's Republic of China. By 2005 it became clear that the anti-Japanese activities went beyond the boundaries of the "historical re-education" and undermined not only diplomatic relations between the countries but also the internal stability. For example, in 2005 Japan tried to become a member of the UN Security Council, but 2.5 million Chinese people within one week only signed a petition against it. On April 9, anti-Japan protests were held across the country. In Shanghai, 20,000 demonstrators even smashed some Japanese businesses and the embassy. Then Beijing decided to return to the policy that existed before 1982, when the historical memory was "under control" and relations between countries were quite friendly [5, p. 473].

Here we can conclude that the historical memory of the Chinese has its own specifics: it can be controlled and regulated by the Communist Party. This happens very effectively due to the high level of loyalty of the people to their government.

In 2012, Xi Jinping became the head of the state. His policy comes down to the fact that the past must be honored and remembered, since history is a link that unites entire Chinese people. In 2014 (this year was dedicated to the 69th anniversary of the Sino-Japanese War) President Xi turned his attention to the Nanjing events of 1937, declaring December 13<sup>th</sup> as the official Day of Remembrance for the victims of the massacre, and September 3<sup>rd</sup> as Victory Day. In the preceding years China had an image of a victim, but now this image was changed. It turned into a victor. So, the victory was the main point of new historical memory policy, not those crimes and horrors (they were not forgotten although). Honoring the victors is fundamental to Xi Jinping's policy [6].

In 2019, the Japanese company Sony chose December 13<sup>th</sup> as the release date for their new product with the slogan "never compromise", which outraged the Chinese. The same thing happened in 2020, when Sony announced the launch of a new product on July 7<sup>th</sup> (the anniversary of the Marco Polo bridge incident). The next year Sony once again presented their new product on July

7<sup>th</sup>. Netizens were first to pay attention to this, Sony apologized and removed the ad. The Chinese government fined the Japanese company 1 million yuan, as it violated the law on advertising, but it happened only in 2021 [7].

In the early 2000s websites dedicated to the events of the Sino-Japanese War began to appear in China, so users could speak in a rather harsh and rude way about the modern Japanese. The Chinese signed several petitions against economic cooperation between the two countries, they also called for a boycott of these same products. Despite the fact that now the degree of hatred is way lower than it was at the beginning of the 21st century, we can see that such moments remain very annoying for Chinese society during these two decades.

Despite such incidents, trade relations between China and Japan are developing. Thus, in 2021, the turnover of goods between the countries increased by 9.4% compared to the previous year [8]. In June 2022, goods worth \$14.8B were exported to Japan, which allowed the country to take third place in China's priority export destinations (after the United States and South Korea). It must be said that the import of Japanese goods to China is also large. In June 2022, there were imported goods to China worth \$15.9B, which makes Japan the second country in the list of PRC's importers (South Korea is the first one) [9]. In addition, the amount of Direct Investment from China to Japan is \$0.5billion, the Direct Investment from Japan to China is \$3.4billion. Even the Sony company claimed the income of their Chinese branch is growing every year. And on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, China, Japan and South Korea signed a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) that will deepen economic interdependence in East Asia by building more integrated supply chains. So, China and Japan remains partners that develop their relations from to year, despite any scandals [10].

We also need to pay attention to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, where the Japanese worship the souls of warriors who fell in battle for the country and the emperor. In 1959, the list of the persons revered in the temple was replenished with the names of soldiers who participated in the Sino-Japanese War, including the names of criminals of the ranks "C" and "B". And in 1978, even criminals of rank "A" began to be venerated in the temple. They were all called the "martyrs". According to the severity of the crimes committed during the War, the Japanese soldiers and commanders were sent to the tribunal and divided into three ranks: "A", "B" and "C", the "A" rank included those who were accused of the cruelest

crimes. Every year on August 15<sup>th</sup>, the day the Second World War ended, memorial services are held in the temple in honor of the fallen soldiers. Even though the Japanese government no longer openly supports these activities of the temple, there is great number of citizens who visit the temple [11].

This temple causes a great resentment among the Chinese. So, in the early 2000s a Chinese activist traveled to Japan and painted graffiti “Go to hell” on the walls of the temple in order to protest. Such incidents never happened again, although Chinese netizens continue to express their dissatisfaction with the fact that Japanese politicians visit this temple quite often. Since 2001, the then Prime Minister of Japan, Junichiro Koizumi, visited the Yasukuni Shrine every year, but the reaction of Chinese politicians followed only 4 years later. In 2005, Chinese Foreign Minister Kun Qian stated that the PRC leadership “strongly protests the visit of the Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese leaders”.

The next Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, was more prudent: first, he refrained from visiting the temple in order to prevent conflicts. In 2006–2007 and 2012–2020 he served as Prime Minister of Japan and visited China 6 times: in 2006, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019 (in total, the Japanese politicians visited China 25 times from 1972 to 2019, the same number of times the Chinese politicians visited Japan during the same period). In 2006, instead of visiting Yasukuni on August 15<sup>th</sup>, Prime Minister sent a gift to the temple (it was a bonsai), but in 2013 he paid a visit there, which caused criticism. Then Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi had a conversation with the Japanese ambassador about the Yasukuni Shrine, he also protested and noted that Japan should remember the lessons of history [12].

After Abe resigned, he visited the temple twice in 2020 and 2021 [13]. He was killed on July 8, 2022, and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang sent a letter of condolences to the Japanese side expressing the regrets of the entire government over Abe’s death [14], the reaction of the Chinese netizens was not so unambiguous

In 2019, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying also expressed concern about Yasukuni Shrine as more Japanese politicians were seen there. Abe’s successor Fumio Kishida in 2021 refused to visit the temple too, he only sent a gift there, but even this gesture aroused the indignation of the Chinese government. On August 13, 2022, the Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan, Yasutoshi Nishimura, visited Yasukuni, and the Chinese



reaction was not long in coming: the official representative of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wang Wenbin, said that Japan confirms its commitment to its erroneous views on historical events, Japan needs to reconsider its position regarding the country's aggressive actions in the past and "take some real steps to regain the trust of Asian countries and the international community" [15].

Also, the Chinese reacted very critically to the news that on August 4, 2022, the Japanese government paid less than \$1 to victims of war crimes from South Korea (both Koreans and Chinese people suffered from Japanese aggression during the war) [16]. Here we should also mention the moment, when Japan decided to stop funding UNESCO, when the organization proposed to include materials about "comfort women" in the World Heritage List in 2017. Here, even the Chinese Foreign Ministry did not stand aside: its official representative stated that Japan should be more "responsible" in rethinking this topic [17, p. 245].

Thus, we can see that the Yasukuni Shrine and other topics related to the Sino-Japanese War are causing general discontent in China among the people, and the government more and more often starts to react on them too.

China and Japan have different estimates of killed people during the war, the Japanese deny many of the crimes committed by soldiers in the occupied territories, there is also an opinion that Japan "did not repent enough" of its crimes after its capitulation. The Chinese government is concerned not only with justice and truth about the events of 1931–1945, but no less significant are the concerns about the Japan's transformation into a powerful military state. When in 2017 Abe proposed to amend Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which states that "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes", China met this idea with criticism. Invoking history, the PRC is trying to prevent the militarization of the neighboring state. This is especially important in some of the disputes that have arisen between countries. For example, the territorial conflict over the ownership of Senkaku Island, which caused a series of anti-Japanese protests in China. In addition, we should not forget that Japan works closely with the United States and supports the Republic of China in Taiwan. For example, in August 2022, we saw the US take off five tanker planes and eight F15 fighter jets from a military base on the Japanese island of Okinawa amid the US House

Speaker Nancy Pelosi visiting Taiwan. In total, there are more than 90 American bases in Japan [18]. Based on the fact that on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the Five Members of the US Congress arrived again in Taiwan, it can be expected that such provocations can contribute to destabilization in the region [19].

In response to Pelosi's actions, China announced military exercises around Taiwan. 5 of 9 ballistic missiles reached special economic zones of Japan. After that, the meeting of the Foreign Ministers of China and Japan, scheduled for August 4<sup>th</sup>, was canceled, and then the Japanese Foreign Ministry spokesman criticized China. This is not the first time when the situation around Taiwan has escalated, but Japan has previously refrained from making any comments. Now the country is ready to take a clear stand against China, even if it hurts Sino-Japanese relations [20].

On July 28, 2022, were published results of a survey, the purpose of which was to find out the opinion of the Chinese people about PRC's partner countries. 3,000 Chinese were asked about Japan, a lot of people noted the following associations with this state: "invasion of China," "Nanjing massacre," "resistance war against Japan," or "cruel history." 28% of respondents maintain a neutral attitude towards the Japanese, 36% have a positive attitude towards them, and the same number has a negative attitude towards them. However, the Chinese noted not only negative moments from history, they also spoke about the developed technical potential of Japan, the culture and traditions of the country [21].

*Conclusion.* We can say that the historical memory of the Sino-Japanese War is a tool in the Chinese policy. The economic cooperation between China and Japan is developing. So the countries are increasing their export–import relations.

Now we are witnessing an escalation of the conflict over Taiwan, which may have a negative impact on Sino-Japanese relations and security in the region as a whole, but there is still no mention of the 1931–1945 years in Beijing's statements. So, there are some fields in Chinese policy, when the government does not appeal to the historical memory. At the same time, it does not mean that the CCP does not take it into account at all.

The Chinese government more often expresses its dissatisfaction with the Yasukuni Shrine, the Chinese people are even more dissatisfied with it. The Chinese also react sharply to other actions of Japan and Japanese companies that

hurt their historical memory. An interesting point can be noted here: by cultivating a reverent attitude towards the events of the War among the people, the CCP acquired the main custodian of the historical memory. We saw that before the country's government could refrain from any commenting all those Japanese "incidents", but the people have always paid attention to them defending the memory of the War. And yet, it is impossible to talk about the unconditional hatred of the Chinese towards the Japanese. The Chinese react sharply, first of all, to the specific provocations, the Government always stays calm, but they show their concerns in restrained manner.

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