

BOOKSHELF

‘China’s Good War’ Review: Present at the Creation

China’s goal of regional leadership and global pre-eminence has required a retooling of its past, including its role in World War II.



Chinese troops crossing the Yellow River in June 1938.

PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE

By Howard W. French

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When I arrived in Tokyo in the late 1990s for a five-year stint as a correspondent, one of my biggest surprises was the near total absence in Northeast Asia of international organizations that could foster and channel cooperation in the area.

I had come to Japan from West Africa, a region then widely known for political instability and poverty. Northeast Asia, by contrast, boasted some of the world’s largest and most dynamic economies. When I mentioned to Asian politicians and scholars how, for all of its weakness, West Africa had a dense network of cooperative bodies that mostly functioned well, and I asked them why their region remained so divided and mutually distrustful, I drew uncomprehending stares and even anger. Didn’t I know that Japan had sought to

colonize China and Korea in living memory and had committed countless atrocities in the process?

This sort of response would follow me when I took a later assignment in China, leading me to point out that, in Europe, former Axis powers were now joined in a tight-knit community with their erstwhile Allied enemies. What was it about Northeast Asia that prevented it from coming together more closely and overcoming its bitter recent past?

This question runs as a major subtext throughout Rana Mitter's "China's Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism." Mr. Mitter, one of Britain's foremost historians of modern China, examines how Beijing has exploited memories of World War II and explores its recent efforts to win global recognition for itself as a principal architect and leading upholder of the international order. The results are probing, but covering so much ground in one slim volume probably makes the text somewhat inaccessible for a general audience, especially for those unfamiliar with Chinese politics and Communist Party historiography. Mr. Mitter notes how the country's civil war between 1945 and 1949, which followed Japan's defeat in World War II and ended in victory for Mao Zedong's Communists over Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists, coincided with the period when most of the postwar arrangements were made.

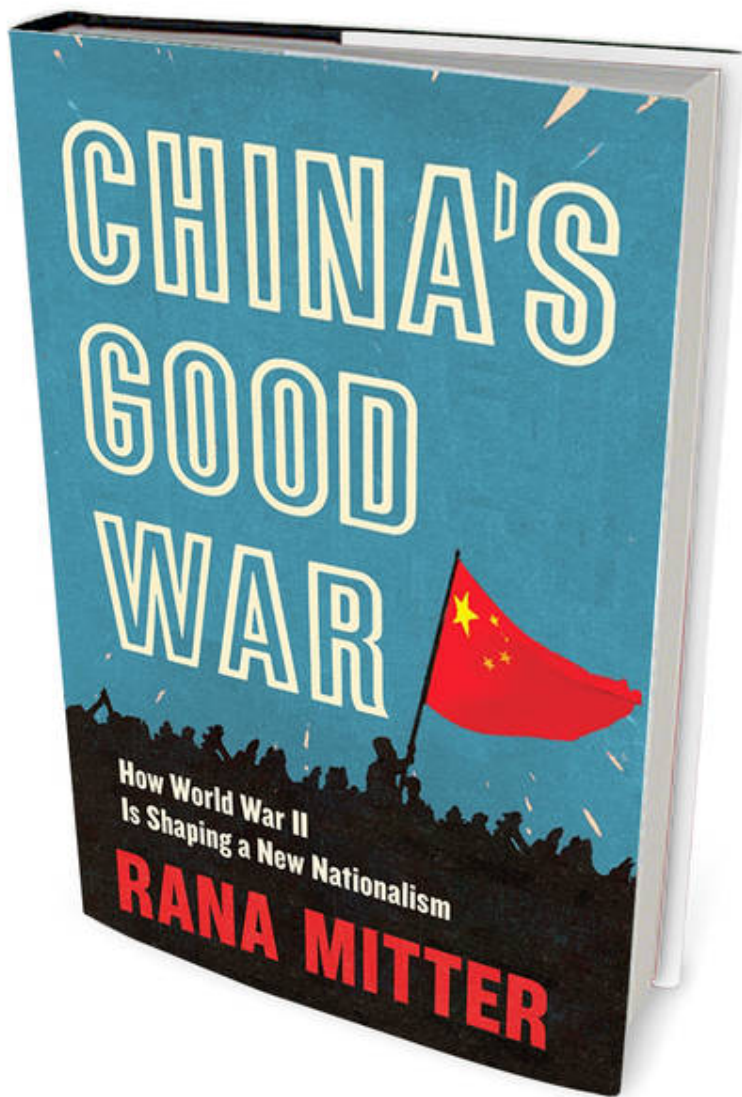


PHOTO: WSJ

CHINA'S GOOD WAR

By Rana Mitter

Belknap/Harvard, 316 pages, \$27.95

In the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. had expected a Nationalist-led China to emerge as Asia's leading power and even helped usher it onto the United Nations Security Council. But the civil war and Mao's victory in 1949, and Beijing's support for North Korea's invasion of American-allied South Korea, led to a rupture in relations with the U.S. that would last into the 1970s. It also meant that the dismantlement of the Japanese empire took place without Chinese participation. Today, with Japan and South Korea

firmly allied with Washington, and North Korea a client of Beijing, there has been little opportunity for unifying narratives to emerge, as happened in Western Europe.

China has cycled through political radicalism and economic autarky under Mao, canny and opportunistic cooperation with the U.S. guided by Deng Xiaoping, and increasingly ambitious international activism, beginning in Africa in the 1990s and, more recently, throughout the world via its Belt and Road Initiative. The one constant has been a desire to return to regional leadership and indeed global pre-eminence. Mr. Mitter's book offers a detailed and fascinating account of how the Chinese leadership's strategy has evolved across eras—and how its recent overtures to regional and international audiences have corresponded to shifts in domestic education and internal propaganda about World War II.

From the Communist victory in 1949 until the 1980s, war narratives in China heavily exaggerated the role of Mao's forces in defeating the Japanese, thereby playing down the efforts of the Nationalists, whose armies in fact accounted for the brunt of the fighting, including almost all of the major battles in China's resistance to the invaders.

China's goal of gaining broader acceptance of its leadership in the world has come to involve recasting World War II altogether. The priority of lionizing Mao and his comrades in founding Communist China has given way to a desire for international legitimacy and admiration. Mr. Mitter shows how this has meant repurposing World War II as China's "good war," a conflict in which the enormous sacrifices made resisting the Japanese after the 1931 invasion of Manchuria bought crucial time for Western powers to gather their strength to confront and defeat Japan in the Pacific. Making such arguments has required China to gradually rehabilitate the long-reviled Nationalists, if not as a political movement at least as combatants.

This Chinese revisionism, expressed not just in textbooks, but increasingly in film and television and proliferating museums, now posits China as the most important Asian battleground of World War II and accords China a decisive role in defeating the Japanese. China, in other words, was "present at the creation" of the current international order and so deserves greater recognition for its past sacrifices and acceptance of its future leadership.

Mr. Mitter respectfully disagrees. “China,” he writes, “was certainly the first Asian battlefield (or battlefield of any sort), and its role in holding back some 600,000 Japanese troops was very important, but the United States’ defeat of Japan in the Pacific was ultimately the deciding factor.”

“China’s Good War” is at its most interesting when probing Beijing’s motives for undertaking such an ambitious retooling of its past in the first place. “China has been beset by an inability to create a narrative with ethical weight behind it,” Mr. Mitter writes. The country’s recent decades of stirring economic success have provided only very limited gains in goodwill and few attempts to emulate its model. Even China’s forays into international development have fostered little more than transactional friendships, while often generating suspicions about Beijing’s motives.

In the author’s view, this challenge of selling itself as a global leader helps explain why China is pushing narratives that give it a central role in World War II. Nonetheless, Mr. Mitter concludes, “with the war more than seven decades in the past, and little sense that China provides an attractive model for generating ‘soft power’ . . . Beijing’s discourse about the war has had considerably less purchase than it would wish.”

Mr. French is the author, most recently, of “Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China’s Push for Global Power.”

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