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FEATURE: PUBLIC MEMORY IN CHINA

Life Histories and National Narratives: Remembering Occupied Manchuria in Postwar China

by *Marjorie Dryburgh*

Chen Bingkan and Wei Zhanhao attended middle school in Shenyang – they were older than me, but only thirteen. After the invasion, the school closed, so they had to come home. They were walking to the station to catch a train. The Japanese had lifted martial law, but when they saw them, they killed Chen Bingkan with their swords without the slightest provocation.¹

Heye'er Lili, born Shenyang, 1921

All our lecturers were well known in Japan, dedicated to scholarship and exemplary teachers – they were not like the militarists. Our mining technology instructor was chair of the Japanese Geological Society. He represented Japan at international conferences and came back with news of Li Siguang and his achievements in that field. . . we were happy and proud to hear that China had such scientists.²

Yang Jihong, born Dalian, 1921

These snapshots of young Chinese people's experience in Japanese-occupied north-east China – 'Manchuria' or 'Manzhouguo' (1931–45) – highlight the challenges of reconciling personal histories of the Sino-Japanese war with official commemoration practices that tend towards the monumental, in museums and in massive compilations of archival records of atrocity. Combined with anniversary events and official denunciations of Japanese wartime behaviour, these underpin a public history of the war with Japan as a period of grave and unrelieved suffering, in which personal histories – of forced industrial and sexual labour, or of massacres witnessed or survived – became emblematic of national victimhood.³ Recent studies of memory work in China have emphasized war memory's contribution to a 'public transcript' of Party-state legitimacy, to borrow James

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Scott's formulation: a complex of explanations and observations designed by elites to position the war in a 'century of national humiliation' and to affirm the Party-state as defender of nation and people.

However, Scott's model assumes also a parallel complex of 'hidden transcripts' that the creation of the public transcript drives into 'off-stage' social spaces but does not erase.⁴ We have seen much less evidence of such non-official, dissonant memories, and few would expect to find ambivalent memories of the sufferings that the official narrative emphasizes. However, as Alessandro Portelli reveals in his work on Italy's war as myth and history, competing postwar memories may rewrite relations among occupied peoples without negating judgements on the occupation itself.⁵ It is striking, therefore, that the personal histories of education explored below suggest other understandings of occupation experience, other communities of memory, and a more fragmented social history of occupation than the orthodox narratives admit. These personal histories originated in a massive Chinese state-funded research project based in Liaoning province, north-east China, led by Qi Hongshen, a history researcher for the Liaoning provincial education gazetteer, an official local history. Inspired by Qi's observation that most earlier research on occupation schooling drew on sources produced by Japanese former officials, teachers and students, the project solicited personal stories from former Chinese students through personal connections, employers, alumni associations, and the press.⁶ Between 2000 and 2003, Qi and his team of over fifty researchers conducted 1200 interviews across the north-east, and published 400 stories – some of several pages, others only a few paragraphs in length – in two collections in 2005.⁷ Nearly ninety percent of subjects were men, with over eighty percent from the majority Han ethnic group. The oldest, born in 1904, were already working as teachers in 1931; most were born in the 1920s and educated to middle-school level in schools run specifically for Chinese pupils (and are therefore a relatively privileged sub-group); a minority reached university or attended schools for Japanese children; the youngest, born in 1937, saw only primary education.

The academic literature in this area maps an uncertain landscape of war-time experience and postwar memory. Although the literature on occupied Manzhouguo – particularly in newer work that explores its social histories – and on education under occupation and colonialism across Asia points to complex and ambiguous experiences, studies of postwar China highlight the determination of the Party-state to iron out ambiguities in public memory. The oral histories in some places reflect the stark lines of Party-approved histories, yet also offer more nuanced stories of life under occupation and a more autobiographical form of remembering that implies different relations between story, storyteller and audience.

EMPIRE, WAR AND SCHOOLING

The occupation order that built this school system was shaped by long-standing military, political and economic tensions. From the late nineteenth

century, Japanese influence in the north-east expanded, economically through the South Manchurian Railway Company (SMRC), politically and militarily through the Japanese armies and socially through a Japanese-owned, Chinese-language press that presented Japan as a benevolent alternative to weak Chinese central governments.⁸ Thus, while invasion and occupation embed the north-east in a fourteen-year history of war, the state of puppet Manzhouguo – headed nominally by Chinese, but run in practice by Japanese armies – was built on a thicker and more ambiguous web of interactions than the provinces occupied after 1937. More recent histories have explored the colonial dimensions of hard commerce and technocratic idealism that drove the Manzhouguo project; Japanese civilian settlement and its postwar unravelling; and debates over identity and cultural production under occupation.⁹ This later work has complicated earlier images of uncontested Japanese control and shifted the focus of research from the high politics and economics of its origins. However, much of the social landscape, particularly in Chinese experience, remains uncharted.

Education matters here, as schooling drew in ever-greater numbers of young north-easterners. Elementary-school enrolments reached one million in 1937 (thirty percent of the age cohort) and over two million in 1943; between twenty-five and thirty-three percent of these were girls. Around four percent of elementary school graduates progressed to middle school (middle schools charged fees; elementary schools did not). Nearly forty percent of middle-school pupils progressed to university, normal school and vocational school, creating a cohort of about 25,000 students by 1942. Major reforms after 1938 reinforced the emphasis at all levels on basic skills, basic Japanese language and a Japan-centred ethics programme.¹⁰ However, scholarship on Manzhouguo education is divided. Work based predominantly on Japanese-language sources has explored policy, curriculum and innovation by Japanese educators, underlining the Japan-centric nature of the system and its contributions to skills development;¹¹ the Chinese academic literature has affirmed its indoctrinating, ‘enslaving’ project, and is generally aligned with orthodox war histories; neither explores the experience of schooling in depth.¹²

Manchuria was not formally a Japanese colony, and its schools before occupation were more modern and more self-consciously aligned with domestic nation-building ambitions than those of pre-colonial Taiwan or Korea. Nonetheless, occupation-era education was largely modelled on those colonial systems.¹³ The wider literature on colonial schooling across Asia emphasizes both its role in the socialization of colonial subjects – the delegitimation of indigenous systems of knowledge, and the maintenance of colonial public transcript – and its capacity to foster colonial nationalisms and the multiple narratives of resistance, evasion and poaching that characterize hidden transcripts.¹⁴ Observing other empires, Japanese officials were critical of British education in India that – they argued – introduced colonial subjects to inconvenient concepts of rights and freedoms; in their

own colonies, they were not always able to enforce their visions of order.¹⁵ Schooling-as-control in Korea secured the imposition of Japanese language and Japanese names in schools; but this was sustained through force rather than persuasion.¹⁶ Education in Taiwan was less overtly repressive, but instead became a site of competition between Taiwanese and Japanese interests.¹⁷

Comparisons with the formal colonies might suggest that education in occupied Manchuria, too, was marked by tensions and ambiguities; this does not figure in the official Chinese narrative, and the existing academic literature is strikingly consistent. In 1980 the first substantial history of the occupied north-east characterized the school system thus:

... throughout the fourteen years of puppet Manchuria, Japanese imperialism restricted education in the north-east to keep the people in ignorance and erode ethnic consciousness... [and] energetically promoted enslaving education to make people into useful subjects and compliant intellectuals.¹⁸

More recently, Song Enrong's massive study of education across occupied China declared:

After the Manchurian Incident, Japanese imperialists... imposed unprecedented destructive and oppressive measures on the north-east's existing schools to make the north-easterners forever compliant Japanese subjects, eradicating their ethnic consciousness, exploiting and oppressing them.¹⁹

Of the several dozen articles published in Chinese since 2005 on education in Manchuria, only a handful draw on the oral history collections; it is only when we turn to the oral histories themselves that we find a more complex picture of occupation and student experience.

TELLING LIVES, MAKING HISTORIES

Earlier work on the making of social memory has emphasized the role that complex discursive processes play in weaving shared social memory from individual pasts.²⁰ In postwar China, these processes were directed from above, as the authorities used an assertive 'public theatre of unanimity' in mass rallies and everyday rituals to popularize approved narratives of revolution, and to create a multi-stranded public narrative²¹ of CCP legitimacy. While in many contexts we expect personal stories to complicate a master narrative, this public remembering was designed specifically to discipline the personal story and to remove opportunities for '... individuals and collectives [to] escape the gravitational pull of powerful social master narratives and imagine the past in new formats and stories'.²² However, the appearance of conformity was periodically disrupted by waves of unorthodoxy in rumours and superstitions that point to the existence of hidden and

dissonant stories that were excluded from official discourse but that circulated in off-stage social spaces.²³

The public narrative relied heavily on the instrumental use of personal storytelling, and early socialist China has been characterized as an 'oral history regime', as the Party deployed personal histories in political education and mobilization, drawing in all Chinese as performers and audiences of politicized self-narration. The new nation was not imagined across decades through the working of print capitalism but imposed at speed through face-to-face meetings across China in which 'speaking bitterness' (*suku*) was used to expose the crimes of revolutionary outsiders, to extract collective meaning from personal pasts, and thereby to build new communities.²⁴

Speaking bitterness offered a scripted remembering of social injustice, commonly in landlord-tenant relations. In the north-east, though, the experience of occupation was central, and we should assume that Qi Hongshen's subjects would have witnessed or participated in this.²⁵ Its success depended on management by Party activists, who recruited speakers and valued memories for their utility. Activists recognized that they were rewriting a public narrative, rather than creating one on a blank slate: they expected to encounter unorthodox memories and were instructed to discard these as unusable.²⁶ While speaking bitterness shared some of the emotional and social aims of other forms of self-narration, the negotiation between personal identity and social accountability that Paul John Eakin identifies as central to autobiographical work was overwritten through the stern application of Party rules. For the purposes of speaking bitterness, the individual was defined by historically bounded experience of oppression and liberation, and not by the unfolding of the life course.²⁷

These commissioned, politicized memories sit uneasily beside oral histories collected by scholars. Oral history methods first attracted scholarly attention in China in the early twentieth century, and substantial projects in the 1950s and 1960s explored local, proto-revolutionary histories. More recently, projects such as Zhou Xun's history of the Great Famine underline the potential contributions of oral methods, even for difficult histories.²⁸ Although researchers in China acknowledge the richness and immediacy of oral history, they question its authority in allusions to 'inherent distortion and unreliability' in oral accounts, and to 'filters' between experience, memory and narrative.²⁹ Speaking bitterness was designed precisely to create such filters. Mariko Asako Tamanoi's judgement that the collections examined below 'seem to reflect the Chinese state's commemoration project' suggests that these filters were successful in this case.³⁰

However, we should not assume that official scripts alone could set the form or content of later remembering. Qi Hongshen's project sits between official and personal remembering. Formally, it was state-funded; it originated in Qi's official research in education history; and it was designed in part as testimony of past suffering and a Chinese retort to revisionist histories in Japan. However, it was also inspired by Qi's observation that the

official record gave scant insight into many aspects of education, and that time to incorporate the personal stories of this ageing alumni population was running out. Oral history promised a more nuanced understanding of the school system, in its impact on those who passed through it, and common ground for collaboration with sympathetic Japanese scholars.³¹ However, we should not read these works simply as an expansion on the official narrative. Qi described them as ‘a living history [of occupation] ... more authentic and more vivid than archival records’; he located their value in the interviewees’ status as eyewitnesses, and not in external interpretations of their experience; and the call for interviews assured potential participants that their stories would be told on their own terms.³²

Qi’s treatment of possible ambiguities in the record is instructive. While distinguishing education from the overt violence of occupation, he noted that schooling was designed to reshape students’ ‘thinking, consciousness, values and knowledge’. Therefore,

The Japanese made great efforts to foster a sense of identity with puppet Manzhouguo. . . , as well as reverence and closeness to Japan. Some older people have still not cast this off. . . If we edit or alter that to conform to published historical work, although we may be preserving historical truth itself, we would be losing sight of the scars that ‘enslaving education’ left on its subjects.³³

This formulation assumes a ‘historical truth’ that transcends individual remembering; it also locates memory and consciousness within the enquiry, rather than treating them as flaws in the sources or impediments to understanding, and thereby marks a shift in the balance of power between interviewer and interviewee. While Qi’s approach did not preclude support for official commemoration, it recognized the possibility and the legitimacy of other memory projects, and their co-production – with draft interview records returned to subjects for editing and published as continuous first-person narratives – allows space for both. We cannot see from the published versions how each story was recrafted between meeting and page,³⁴ and should expect to see traces of speaking bitterness or self-criticism in the oral histories; however, the works discussed below are all more complex than these scripted forms of remembering allowed.

FOUR STORIES AND BEYOND

Official commemoration of war in the north-east, notably as expressed in Shenyang’s September 18th Historical Museum (Fig. 1), embodies the monumental affront of occupation. The oral histories challenge us to consider the human experience of occupation, and their relation to official narratives is uncertain. A terse summary of these stories could state that Qi’s interviewees returned repeatedly to three themes of ‘enslavement’, violence and resistance; but the detail of their stories reveals greater complexity than those



Fig. 1. The September 18 Historical Museum, Shenyang, commemorates the Japanese invasion of north-east China in 1931. Photograph by the author, August 2014.

keywords suggest. They remembered the ideological content of schooling as an imposition, but declined to reduce their personal histories to that experience of constraint; they remembered that violence was pervasive, but that it was neither unmitigated nor unambiguous; that resistance was widespread, though not always on orthodox terms. They also highlight a fourth theme, resilience, which pushes against the certainties of official narrative.

The varying emphases of the stories, the shifts in voice as interviewees moved between topics, and the ambivalence reflected in these stories are all at odds with the certainties of official commemoration.³⁵ The discussion below draws on three selections of oral histories. The first group of four stories illustrates the range of tellable tales: two stories, by Cheng Maolin and Jiang Jingfang, underline the sufferings of life under occupation; two others, Zhang Weiqian and Jiang Zhinan, had routine extended contact with Japanese from early childhood to working life and are respectively more ambivalent and almost nostalgic. In the fuller discussion that follows those four, I draw on stories by sixteen subjects who attended university or college and worked for the occupation authorities,³⁶ and twenty-one subjects born in 1921, most of whom saw both the creation of the occupation system and the 1938 reforms; their education histories were more varied.³⁷

Cheng Maolin's story underlined the violence of occupation that spilled over into the classroom. To this extent, it amplifies official narratives. However, Cheng recentred the story so that stories of national suffering and revolutionary martyrdom were framed within memories of

individual pain and families' fears for their children. After observing, 'I'm eighty now, and my memory isn't what it was', Cheng opened with a vivid recollection of a Japanese teacher's exasperation at his inability to learn the language.

He pulled out a thumbtack and pushed it into the side of my head, grunting, 'Why can't you get it right?' It hurt so much I was grimacing with pain, and sure it would start bleeding... That's how brutal they were: we Chinese had no rights and no freedom; we were slaves.³⁸

Students in Maolin's agricultural high school worked, unpaid, on experimental farms whose produce fed their Japanese teachers; they were taught that, although the north-east was rich in soya beans and sorghum, it could not develop without Japanese tutelage.³⁹ Resentment was widespread, but resistance was risky; Maolin's Chinese ethics teacher, who encouraged students to remember their Chinese roots, disappeared without warning or explanation: 'It wasn't until two years later that I heard that either he had escaped to Tongjiang to join the Resistance League, or he had been murdered.'⁴⁰ Violence in schools was amplified outside. Maolin's parents forbade him to watch the Japanese guard-post near his home, which was known for attacks on passers-by; his childish enjoyment of watching barges passing on the Songhua River evaporated when he learned that they carried conscript labour; and he remembered later seeing 'Reds' escorted to execution on its banks.⁴¹

Jiang Jingfang's story⁴² also stressed the inequalities of occupation; whereas Cheng Maolin's story was marked by violence, Jingfang's emphasized humiliation, from the framework of the curriculum to everyday school activity. Jingfang attended the Girls' National High School in Gaiping, near Dalian. Teaching was pervaded by 'propaganda' and designed, she explained, '... to make us virtuous, diligent and compliant citizens, slaves of the Japanese'; the daily routine featured assemblies in which flags were raised, imperial edicts recited and the Manzhouguo national anthem sung.⁴³ The school had four Chinese and two Japanese teachers, a Chinese principal and Japanese deputy principal – as was typical – and around one hundred student boarders. Rules were strict, rooms were unheated and food was 'revolting': a monotonous diet of maize, sorghum, cabbage and pickled vegetables, often infested with maggots.⁴⁴

This routine was punctuated by outbursts from the Japanese physical education teacher.

One winter morning at assembly, when it was snowing and very cold, she flew into a rage for no reason that I could see, and kept us standing in the snow for forty minutes as a punishment. Even the principal and teachers had to stay, until all our uniforms were coated with snow.⁴⁵

Some actions seemed less impulsive and more pre-meditated:

Our school was close to the city wall; outside was a row of single-storey houses, some of which were brothels. . . sometimes she made us run along here in phys ed class. We were all old enough to know what this was – who would willingly run through a place like that? When we objected, she stood on the city wall, laughing and mocking us, throwing stones and forcing us to run. We could not have felt more humiliated. . .⁴⁶

After graduation, Jingfang secured a government job in Xinjing through Communist contacts and wrote anti-Japanese articles for the underground press. She was arrested for these activities in 1944, but did not elaborate on that experience; the contempt of her physical education teacher remains the defining image of her story.⁴⁷

Embedded in Maolin and Jingfang's stories are memories of pain, shame and anger, that were more vivid than the descriptions of curriculum content and school routines. These draw our attention back from distant injury to the immediacy of physical or emotional pain. Whereas the conventions of speaking bitterness dictated that personal experience be retold in service of societal or national suffering, in these stories the personal takes centre stage.

Others, however, remembered progress through school as a journey of achievement. Zhang Weiqian's⁴⁸ father worked for the Japanese-owned Fengtian Ice Company in Shenyang and the family lived in company accommodation, surrounded by Japanese families and children. In elementary school, Weiqian learned Japanese easily, and performed in plays such as *Peach Boy* (Momotarô), a folk-tale reinvented as propaganda, directed at children in textbooks and in the animated film *Momotarô and the Eagles of the Ocean* (*Momotarô no Umiwashi*).⁴⁹ Middle school was marked by fights with other schools: 'I can't remember what it was about – football, maybe? – but with Fengtian 5th Middle School we fought whenever we met.'⁵⁰ Students respected most Chinese teachers; Weiqian credited one Japanese teacher with helping him overcome his childhood stammer, though other less popular teachers – mostly Japanese – were openly mocked. Discipline was harsh: one Japanese teacher beat a pupil so severely that the boy attempted suicide.⁵¹

Later, Weiqian studied economics at Xinjing University of Law and Politics. He still excelled in Japanese, slacking off only to avoid standing out. Chinese and Japanese students shared classes, but not living accommodation. In the evenings, Chinese students sang patriotic songs – quietly, for fear of detection – and a few planned more purposeful acts of resistance.⁵² 'Labour service' in the far north brought contact with Japanese soldiers, including a young officer who spent his evenings drinking tea and ordering beatings, and an older soldier who gave the Chinese students red bean cakes and showed them his family photos.⁵³ Having begun by observing, 'I'm a retired Japanese teacher, and you could say the foundations of my Japanese were laid down at elementary school', Weiqian concluded, 'Because of my

education and profession, I have maintained a great interest in Japan. . . I understand Japan, but am not pro-Japanese!’⁵⁴ Whereas official narratives emphasized Chinese resistance to a monolithic occupation order, Weiqian’s story underlined both differences among Japanese and his own capacity to identify and navigate these.

For Jiang Zhinan,⁵⁵ the creation of a community that drew in Chinese and Japanese students was a source of pride; while the trope of ‘enslaving education’ assumed Chinese subordination, Zhinan suggested rather that she won herself a place in the society of her peers. Zhinan’s father was a businessman, and she grew up between Andong, on the Korean border, and the major port of Dalian.⁵⁶ She was educated mostly in Japanese schools, sometimes as the only Chinese pupil:

When I first went to primary school, it was really hard. I couldn’t understand anything the teacher or my classmates were saying. It took a good six months for me to understand; then it felt as if someone had switched on a light. I was so happy.⁵⁷

Understanding Japanese gave Zhinan greater confidence, but did not remove all divisions: ‘One day in elementary school I took onions and rice for lunch. The other girls held their noses and walked off. There was nothing I could do – but I never took that lunch to school again.’⁵⁸ Later, the sharing of food created fond memories of summer camp on the coast:

The school borrowed a long fishing net from the local people, and we lined up on the shore to fish – when the net was full it was heaving with fish of all sizes. It was a magnificent sight. . . That evening, students and teachers feasted on seafood.⁵⁹

Zhinan noted that the community of Chinese students could be fragile; when she and Chinese friends were reported for reading banned books and organizing a private graduation party, it was another Chinese student who informed on them.⁶⁰ But she valued her education and paid little attention to the framework of occupation until the Japanese surrender: ‘In August 1945, we were liberated. . . only then did I realize that I had received an enslaving education.’⁶¹ She concluded,

The Japanese people should not be held responsible for those painful events – that was between the governments . . . In the last ten or so years, I have invited many of my former classmates to Dalian . . . The newspapers call me the ‘people’s diplomat’, and that makes me feel that I have done the right thing.⁶²

Weiqian and Zhinan’s stories quietly challenge the insistence of the master narrative on a homogeneous Japanese presence under occupation:

Weiqian's embrace of Sino-Japanese community is more qualified than Zhinan's – and we should note that both had access to Japanese schools only because of their relatively privileged status – but both see engagement with Japanese peers and teachers as an academic and personal achievement. Like Cheng Maolin, these two also recall learning the nature of the occupation; while this allowed Maolin to reinterpret things not earlier understood, both Weiqian and Zhinan remembered experiences that simply did not fit into this growing understanding.

These four stories underline the diversity in remembered school experience and exposure to the darker aspects of occupation. Reading outwards from these, we find further glimpses of hidden narratives of life under occupation. As we might expect, the stories return repeatedly to remembered resentments and the constraining structures of occupation, though these are consistently seen through the lens of personal experience. However, as the stories touch on personal engagement and responses to that order, they diverge from the public narrative: Zhang Weiqian and Jiang Zhinan's experience of ambivalence and resilience was by no means universal; nor was it unique.

'ENSLAVEMENT'

Education was central to the Japanese public narrative of harmony under occupation, and this was recognized in the Chinese description of schooling as a 'second phase' of the invasion, designed to 'enslave' (*nuhua*) and to 'keep the people in ignorance' (*yumin*). This recurs with little variation across memories of education at all levels; a graduate of the Army Officers' Academy concluded, 'From elementary school to university, [this] was colonial education for the slaves of a ruined country'.⁶³

The civic and socializing projects of education made the occupation very visible in the classroom. Before 1931, anti-imperialist teaching was common in China: Zhao Zhensheng was taught 'how the warlords and imperialists carved China up like a melon', and Yang Jihong remembered schoolbook pictures of China as a cherry leaf, eaten by the 'poisonous worm' of Japan.⁶⁴ After 1931, language primers offered Japanese explanations of the occupation, and history and geography texts emphasized deep connections between Japan and 'economically underdeveloped' Manchuria. Discussions of recent conflicts in older textbooks were physically excised or blotted out with black ink.⁶⁵ Technical content was diluted: Sun Baowu suggested, 'they were afraid we'd be hard to control if we knew too much'.⁶⁶

The need for control was served by an ethics curriculum that drew on the myths of Japanese nationalism and selected content from traditional Chinese works to demand compliance and reverence for authority.⁶⁷ School routines were punctuated by assemblies like those recalled by Jiang Jingfang, at which school principals read from imperial edicts which they handled with white-gloved hands, and all bowed towards the imperial residences in Xinjing and Tokyo.⁶⁸ Ideological content rose in higher education: periods of 'quiet contemplation' were embedded in university routines; after

1937, teachers and students kept reflective diaries, produced occasional essays on significant events, and joined in celebrations as Chinese cities fell to the Japanese armies.⁶⁹

Many recalled resenting the hours spent on Japanese language study, arguing that it created a generation of students with poor Chinese language skills and a weak sense of Chinese identity.⁷⁰ Shang Shihua and Zhang Yaoxian, who attended elite Japanese-run schools and worked in the Ministry of Education and Culture before 1945 described occupation schooling as ‘poisonous’ and fraudulent; Lü Zhankun’s geometry teacher told him, ‘You should be learning Japanese to study advanced Japanese technology and culture. Actually, you’re learning it to translate for them – they say a sentence and you translate it, the very image of slavery’.⁷¹

‘Enslaving education’ thus appeared as a forced retreat from knowledge, as vivid images of China’s predicament in pre-1931 textbooks were erased, and was marked by forced performance of compliance in daily rituals. It was also understood as a social impairment, as neglect of Chinese language and ‘proper’ national knowledge eroded students’ capacity to speak and act as Chinese. The official narrative reads this as a national loss of human capital, but the stories also reveal a sense of personal loss; and the ‘enslaving’ trope itself undermined former students’ sense of efficacy and confidence in their own knowledge.

VIOLENCE

The stories also affirm the visible violence in the occupation, the rumours of violence unseen that circulated person-to-person, and the threat of violence that hung over schools. Violence was variously arbitrary and instrumental: in summer 1936, there were mass arrests of ‘progressive’ teachers and education officials in Andong, and in Qiqiha’er in the north. Hu Shijie named teachers from his school who were arrested; Sun Baowu listed those in Andong – including his own uncle – who were imprisoned or executed or who died by suicide in jail.⁷² Surveillance and entrapment too were pervasive: Heye’er Lili saw Chinese cinema-goers arrested for cheering newsreel footage of Chinese army exercises, and Shao Baoqing’s classmates were duped by Japanese agents posing as Communists and imprisoned.⁷³ Students and teachers suspected of ‘progressive’ thinking were harassed by the military police, anti-Japanese activism was designated a ‘thought crime’ (*sixiang fan*), and arrests took place in school dormitories and at graduation ceremonies.⁷⁴

Generally, though, the stories say much more about everyday corporal punishment. Deng Chang remembered a Japanese teacher sending a Chinese student to wash his face so that he did not dirty his hand by slapping him, and Zhu Erchun recalled:

Kanetani was a little man, and liked to slap the older students’ faces. Once, he wanted to slap a student for not having his collar done up – he was too short to reach the student’s face, and tried to jump up. But the

student leaned back out of reach, so Kanetani clenched his fist like a boxer and punched him in the chest.⁷⁵

Corporal punishment was embedded in everyday hardship. As Jiang Zhinan remembered, food was a marker of status and community: Japanese received white rice, while Chinese were allowed only coarse grains such as sorghum; Chinese students worked school vegetable plots to supplement Japanese teachers' rations, but not their own; ration books were colour-coded by ethnicity.⁷⁶ Schooling was practically connected with the war through 'labour service' – in agricultural, factory and construction work including roads and airfields – which replaced classes in some schools after 1941. Work was typically harder for Chinese students than for Japanese or Korean; Liu Chengren recalled constant hunger – on one posting, students were reduced to eating horse fodder – rations were cut if the weather prevented students from working, and one of Yang Xiaoxian's classmates lost part of an arm after a snake bite became infected.⁷⁷

The confrontation between Chinese students and Japanese authority formed the top notes of the occupation story, and violent outbursts became more common as the war progressed. Chen Xiangling relished the memory of a brawl in the Officers' Academy canteen, 'There were bowls and chopsticks flying everywhere, and the Japanese students were beaten until the floor was strewn with spectacles; it didn't stop until the Japanese officers came to step in'.⁷⁸ Other Chinese military-academy students rebelled just before the formal surrender and killed their company commander.⁷⁹ A handful of stories complicate this picture of Chinese solidarity. Relations between Chinese teachers and students were often tense; at Li Zheng's school, older students beat younger ones so often and so severely that some did not dare attend graduation ceremonies. Li Zhenzhong remembered a Chinese teacher: 'Yu was terrible and every single student hated him. I heard that, at the restoration, students beat him to death'.⁸⁰

While the worst stories of violence come at second hand, the number of these, and the commonly remembered fear of violence, suggest that this was central to understandings of the occupation order for all but the youngest. Students may not have seen that violence, but they recognized it. Here again, we may read the stories in two ways: the official narrative of occupation encourages us to see violence or hardship in school as a sign that suffering was inescapable; the personal stories, conversely, may suggest rather that the wider violence of occupation was felt most keenly through the proxy of individual pain or humiliation.

RESISTANCE

Resistance features in the public narrative of war as a natural response, led by the Communist Party, to the physical, symbolic and threatened violence of occupation. However, as James Scott notes, it is in the interests of the relatively powerless to avoid open insubordination; the impulse to resist is

most often explored and rehearsed in hidden narratives and safer off-stage spaces. Acts of disrespect and non-compliance – Scott’s ‘weapons of the weak’ – were commoner than politically-framed defiance.

Communist Party leadership in resistance is rarely mentioned, and Jiang Jingfang’s story of Party activism is not typical. The most organized potential resistance appeared in networks of reading groups in higher-level schools; these circulated ‘progressive’, ‘anti-Japanese’ books that were not specifically socialist. Deng Chang – identified by a former student as a CCP activist who exhorted his classes to ‘develop their skills and wait for the right time to turn their guns on Japan’ – did not mention Party work in his own story. Many committed activists left for the wartime capital, Chongqing, or the CCP base in Yan’an; others simply disappeared: the story of resistance is more often a story of abrupt and unexplained departures than of achievements.⁸¹

The uncertainty that surrounded resistance appears also in the story of Jilin Normal University student Gao Bocang, who features in five works cited here, including four from the 1921 birth cohort. The core of Gao’s story is that, at a meeting after a study tour to Japan, Gao offended staff by his comments and was punished. Further details vary between the five retellings: Gao had described inequalities between Japan and Manzhouguo, or spoken disrespectfully of Japan, or observed that he felt ‘awkward’ speaking to his Chinese classmates in Japanese; he was punished by beating, or suspension, or expulsion; he subsequently disappeared, or transferred successfully to another school and was shielded from police attention by his Japanese teachers.⁸² The recurrence of Gao’s story suggests first that the hidden narratives of occupation were fed by the off-stage circulation of consoling rumours, and second that the messages of these rumours were not fixed.⁸³

Many more stories refer to everyday evasions, as students made detours to avoid bowing before a Shintō shrine, parodied the words of the national anthem, skipped school to observe traditional holidays, and posted anti-Japanese graffiti.⁸⁴ Unpopular teachers were ignored or ridiculed: Wang Yalan recalled, ‘If we didn’t want to go to class, we’d pick up our bookbags and leave’; when her Japanese teacher banged on the desk in frustration at his pupils’ laziness, ‘We banged on the tables, too, much louder than he could, and there was nothing he could do about it!’; Li Zhenzhong’s class nicknamed a Japanese teacher, Honda, as ‘*hundān*’ (‘bastard’); and Zhu Erchun’s class punished a Chinese teacher by stealing and circulating his love letter to a local girl: ‘After that, he didn’t dare step out of line again’.⁸⁵

This sly delinquency was often supported by Chinese teachers, who urged students to hold to their identity as Chinese, and passed on news of Japanese wartime defeats.⁸⁶ They taught traditional poetry and stories such as the lyric ‘Whole River Red’ (*Man jiang hong*) – a twelfth-century denunciation of alien rule – which was accepted by the occupation authorities as safely ‘patriotic’, even though they banned other, contemporary songs.⁸⁷ He

Naiyan's teachers were as reluctant as their pupils to pursue Japanese classes: joking that the language would soon be useless, they carried on teaching English until they forgot to clean the blackboard and were discovered; Lü Zhankun's ethics teacher dismissed the myth of Amaterasu Ōmikami – the sun goddess whose status as 'common ancestor' of Japan's imperial family and people underpinned wartime ideologies of nation – as 'lies told by simpletons'.⁸⁸

Thus, acts of resistance were often less dignified than the master narrative suggests and are framed as 'trickster tales' rather than as revolutionary legends.⁸⁹ This should not surprise us: Ben Uchiyama's work on the Japanese munitions worker as trickster underlines the wartime state's vulnerability to disruption closer to home;⁹⁰ despite the resources devoted to formal control in Manchuria, space remained for small acts of practical and symbolic non-compliance.

RESILIENCE

As the stories turn away from the hierarchies and structures of education, they sketch other histories that contribute little to a master narrative of oppression. Instead, they show features that are more characteristic of autobiographical work than of speaking bitterness, and these are instructive. Stories of relations with Japanese teachers and students, purposeful engagement with education, and recognition that occupation schooling set the course of post-war lives, delineate an 'extended self of memory and anticipation... existing continuously across time',⁹¹ and assert students' moral autonomy. Thus they erode the stark division that speaking bitterness assumed between suffering in the old society and transformation in the new, and assert the authority of the rememberers over the meanings of their own pasts.

We see, for example, that education offered economic security, and that students forced out of school by poverty might later return to study, even when that hardship arose from Japanese actions. Jiao Dianzhen, whose father was determined to see him educated, entered elementary school at the age of eight in 1929. In 1931, Japanese forces shot his father and grandfather and burned down the family home. Jiao left school and worked for five years to support his surviving family before resuming teacher training at Japanese-run Haicheng Normal School.⁹² Yan Binghai's family hit hard times when the Japanese authorities confiscated their land; Yan left middle school and worked to support them, but later returned to study at Jilin Normal University and the Datong Institute, an elite training school for officials.⁹³ He recalled,

The way I saw it, I could take up a [Datong Institute] place and either prepare for study in Japan, which was better academically, or I could become a high-ranking middle school teacher, with better salary and conditions... This shows how short-sighted I was, and how there were political snares and pitfalls everywhere.⁹⁴

That said, engagement with schooling did not imply any attachment to Manzhouguo on its own terms: for some, it was simply a means of avoiding conflict. Ma Zhuanpeng was advised by his Chinese boss to apply to the Datong Institute to dispel suspicions over his political inclinations; Wang Yalan and her husband went to study in Tokyo, hoping that this would shield their landlord families from trouble with the Japanese authorities.⁹⁵

Many packaged stories of academic progress with an insistence that they were consciously selective in their studies, and separated aspects of education that they valued from wider structures of control. Their remembered distaste for some subjects sat beside a conviction that others were too important to neglect. Even Cheng Maolin saw the utility of learning Japanese: ‘... otherwise, how could you study?’⁹⁶ Liu Chengren’s peers at Jianguo University urged him, ‘We didn’t come here to become senior officials; we came to get useful knowledge and skills’; and he recalled,

Anything I expected to find useful in future, I would study hard... At first I was not interested in martial arts... [later] I realized that I should make use of Jianguo... [to] improve my strength and fighting skills. Anything I didn’t think useful I would avoid, such as the ‘people’s ethics’... , [but] it was useful to have a broad understanding of natural sciences, history, and economic geography, and some knowledge of Japanese economic theory.⁹⁷

Sun Baowu remembered his (Chinese) maths teacher’s advice at Andong Normal College: ‘If your maths results are good, you won’t do badly in anything. It’s a question of moral fibre: maths builds character’; and character-building was at the centre of Sun’s story. As he recalled: ‘My results weren’t that good, but I got on well with the teachers, so Mr Yu nominated me as dorm leader... in a school of 500 students, keeping good relations between staff and pupils is really hard, especially when you’re as young as I was.’ Beside his remembered respect for teachers and patriotic activists, and resentment of the Manzhouguo order, Sun gave equal weight to his own growing confidence in managing peers and teachers, quelling a mass brawl in the school canteen with a few well-chosen words, and urging a Chinese teacher not to beat students.⁹⁸

Students who spent longer in education and attended higher institutions were more likely to be taught by more qualified staff, and more likely to be on good terms with them. These students recalled rigorous entry procedures that excluded slackers and intense competition for elite school places.⁹⁹ Jiang Zhinan described her obstetrics training, ‘Everyone there was Japanese; the teachers were very highly educated and you had to pass an examination run by the city authorities before graduation’.¹⁰⁰ Yan Binghai singled out his Japanese maths teacher, whom he regularly saw outside class; Ma Zhuanpeng’s classmates dubbed their biology teacher at Jilin Normal

University, ‘the poet of entomology’.¹⁰¹ Yang Jihong remembered Lushun Industrial University as a place where scholarship transcended national boundaries: relations between staff and students were cemented in small, specialized study groups, and academics conducted primary research and returned from conferences with insights into new developments. Yang chose his specialism in polymer chemistry because of his respect for the tutor and they stayed in contact after the war.¹⁰²

Others remembered Japanese teachers’ displays of solidarity with their Chinese students, and recognized that they too suffered the stresses of war, in their fear of conscription – as Yang Jihong’s Japanese classmates lamented, ‘They say this life is sixty years, but we are only twenty-five...!’¹⁰³ Lü Zhankun remembered the respect shown to Chinese students by another who had just left the army, ‘...as if he had realized we would not be defeated’.¹⁰⁴ One of Zhang Jilin’s Japanese teachers was sacked for criticizing the war; when students gathered to mark his departure, he assured them, ‘righteous Japanese oppose the invasion’.¹⁰⁵

Few subjects explain the decisions that they made about work before 1945, though the brief biographical details that preface each story show that they worked during and after the war as teachers, medics, engineers, bureaucrats and police officials: a generation of leadership in the postwar north-east was in part the product of Japanese-run education. Huo Cunhui, principal of the Shenyang Music Institute at time of retirement, had studied music at Jilin Senior Normal School and worked as a musician in the Manchurian Army. Hu Shijie, principal of Qiqiha’er Hospital, was a Manchuria Medical University alumnus. *People’s Daily* reporter Nie Changlin graduated from the elite Jianguo University. Yang Jihong, senior engineer at the massive Anshan Steel Corporation had attended Lushun Industrial University. Zhang Faquan, principal of Siping Normal College, had studied there during the occupation.¹⁰⁶

Other postwar legacies of occupation schooling were more difficult: Zhang Weiqian held university posts teaching Japanese between 1962 and retirement in 1987, but had earlier spent thirteen years as bookkeeper in a tobacco factory; and while Guan Naiying ended her career as a research associate at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, she spent twenty years in rural ‘labour reform’ after being ‘wrongly designated a Rightist’ in 1958.¹⁰⁷ Political accusations, followed by internal exile or demotion, were common in the mass campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s, and the severing of politically dangerous relationships or the destruction of incriminating possessions is a common trope of Cultural Revolution experience; yet many kept school photographs, graduation certificates, or exercise books, or were members of alumni associations that connected them to their wartime school experience.¹⁰⁸

These stories of resilience elaborate on themes raised by the histories of Zhang Weiqian and Jiang Zhinan. The framework of ‘enslaving education’ implicitly devalued graduates as it condemned schooling, and presented

education as an integrally oppressive system; the oral histories blurred that official narrative. While acknowledging the political framing of education and its consequent ethical challenges, they emphasized the utility and value of schooling, and offered stories of personal development, efficacy and instrumental choice within the system. At the same time, they recast schools as a series of communities – Chinese and Japanese, students and teachers – that worked in tension with each other but that nonetheless might overlap and communicate productively.

CONCLUSIONS

Memory and personal histories of schooling in occupied Manchuria show us two generations of public narrative at work. The personal histories offer a commentary on the public narratives of occupation, as well as rich corroborative detail on the workings of occupation-era schools, and to this extent they feed a postwar public narrative of wartime suffering. None suggest that the occupation order was legitimate or benevolent. Most affirm that the occupation-era discourses of harmony-in-occupation were read at the time as an attempt to create compliance – ‘to enslave’ – and most recall knowing that the discursive order that underpinned the curriculum, daily routines and public communication was enforced by greater or lesser acts of violence. They also reveal that the public narrative of harmony generated hidden narratives of resistance and evasion by Chinese students.

The personal histories underline important complexities and variations in the experience of occupation. Although the interview subjects were not particularly diverse, the cumulative effect of their stories is to produce a more nuanced portrait of the occupation order. Some variations are easy enough to explain: the children of the economically secure had much easier lives than those from aspiring or (relatively) struggling families; the experience of schooling was shaped in important ways by gender; older children generally understood the darker side of occupation better than younger ones. Traumatic, public local events powerfully shaped personal memories, but so did private encounters with unusually benevolent or malevolent Japanese teachers.

Other variations cannot be packaged so easily into conventional meanings of *Manzhouguo*. The personal histories reverse earlier postwar uses of memory, prioritizing individual rememberers over public narrative. Whereas speaking bitterness was designed to mine individual pasts for national and revolutionary insights, these oral histories draw our attention back to the personal effects of schooling. This is most visible in stories that re-centre bodily sensation and face-to-face communities in histories of occupation and that insist on individuals’ moral autonomy as wartime actors and postwar storytellers. Similarly, the resistance described in the oral histories was directed most visibly at the everyday slights of occupation, and appeared in mundane acts of fighting, low-level sabotage and slacking, graffiti, parody and mockery. The ‘weapons of the weak’ were always at hand, and the

stories tell us that these mattered. These narrative choices suggest hidden – or at least neglected – narratives of wartime experience and postwar remembering.

The centrality of the personal is reflected also in the naming of those who suffered, inflicted suffering or defended students against suffering, and in the emphasis on personal relations as these shaped experience. This suggests that the audience of the stories was the face-to-face communities of school and peer-group, rather than the imagined community of nation or revolution. The naming of Japanese teachers has the effect of detaching them from the monolithic category of ‘Japanese invader’, asserting that they were able to make choices (however limited), assigning responsibility for those choices, and affirming the authority of the storyteller to judge those actions. The naming of victims ensured that they were commemorated, as relatives, friends or peers and not simply as tropes for the national suffering of occupation.

The personal histories move further from the orthodox narratives as they explore more pragmatic engagement with schooling. Students stayed in school despite the pervasive propaganda and diluted content, and despite acts of violence that ranged from corporal punishment in school to the murder of friends, neighbours and family members outside; and they associated progress in education with efficacy, self-development, and forms of liberation. Some acknowledged that they came to full understanding of the occupation and their schooling only after 1945, but others were unapologetic in identifying value in aspects of their education and in remembering their choices as pragmatic and rooted in personal ambition rather than in submission to the occupation order.

These memories connected life under occupation to the postwar; while focused primarily on the self in society rather than on the interior life, they are nonetheless more formally autobiographical than the ‘speaking bitterness’ genre demanded. This shift in genre is not merely formal, and the stories do not simply elaborate on familiar, orthodox renderings of the past. This implies also different narrative choices, and a degree of autonomy as subjects retold and reinterpreted their own pasts. Life during wartime had left the alumni of occupation schools practised in accommodation, evasion, and the nurturing of subaltern community and hidden narrative. The postwar public narrative acknowledges this in its emphasis on wartime resistance, and we see that willingness to stand aside from orthodoxy reflected also in these relatively recent oral histories. These reveal both a stubborn refusal in the past of consent to the occupation order and an assertion in later remembering that those former students were neither passive victims of the occupation nor passive consumers of historical narratives that came from outside their own experience.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- 66 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 140, 142–3; quotation from p. 131.
- 67 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 140–1, 177–8, 358; *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 73, 111, 124, 131, 137, 138–9, 144, 148.
- 68 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 177–8; *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 109, 111, 120, 122, 130, 139, 142, 143, 144, 148, 151.
- 69 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 146–7; *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 16, 111, 114, 122, 176–7.
- 70 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 140, 180, 200, 359; *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 14, 75, 109, 131, 139, 140, 144.
- 71 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, p. 141.
- 72 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 130–2, 133, 146–7; also 143, 175–6.
- 73 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 52, 202; *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 134; 136–7.
- 74 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 52, 117, 127, 129, 134, 145, 177, 342; *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 151, 181, 199, 202, 205.
- 75 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 15–17, also 52, 121, 127, 128–9, 132, 134–5, 136, 138–9, 140, 141, 144–5, 146, 164, 413–4; *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 363, 200.
- 76 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 177, 216–17, 360; *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 112, 117, 123, 127, 138.
- 77 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 32, 53, 127, 130, 138, 141, 142–3, 173–5; *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 209, 276, 360–1.
- 78 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, p. 414.
- 79 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, p. 135.
- 80 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, p. 363; *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 111, 117, 120, 128, 132, 676.
- 81 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 197, 208, 278–9, 204, 340; *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 414–5, 32, 13–17, 127, 129, 164, 175, 178–9.
- 82 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 51–2, 126, 129, 146–7; *Mosha*, ed. Qi, p. 210.
- 83 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 129, 134.
- 84 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 73, 143, 202, 339; *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 129, 132, 136–7, 141–2, 143, 176.
- 85 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 46, 128, 144–5; *Mosha*, ed. Qi, p. 362.
- 86 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 199, 208, 275; *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 130, 132–3, 137, 141.
- 87 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 340, 414.
- 88 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 116, 110, 141. On Amaterasu, see Dower, *War without Mercy*, pp. 222–3.
- 89 Scott, *Domination*, pp. 85–7, 114, 162–3.
- 90 Ben Uchiyama, 'The Munitions Worker as Trickster in Wartime Japan', *Journal of Asian Studies* 76: 3, 2017, pp. 655–74.
- 91 Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, p. 3.
- 92 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 109–10.
- 93 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, p. 209.
- 94 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 145, 214.
- 95 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 53, 46.
- 96 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, p. 275.
- 97 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 76–7.
- 98 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, p. 132.
- 99 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 337, 339; *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 674, 676.
- 100 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, p. 75.
- 101 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 209–10, 213; *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, p. 52.
- 102 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, p. 124.
- 103 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, p. 123.
- 104 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, p. 141.
- 105 *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, p. 32.
- 106 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, p. 218; *Jianzheng*, ed. Qi, pp. 128, 129, 121, 138. Of these forty subjects, one was already employed as a teacher in 1931, twenty-eight began work during the occupation, and eleven were still in education in 1945.
- 107 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 336, 174.
- 108 *Mosha*, ed. Qi, pp. 75, 342, 212–3; Qi, 'Guanyu Riben qin Hua', pp. 59–60.