


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rehabilitating Republican China: Historical Memory, National Identity and Regime Legitimacy in the Post-Mao Era

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Abstract

Described in the Chinese Communist Party's orthodox historiography as a dark and repressive period and part of the “century of humiliation,” the Republican era has in recent decades undergone a significant reassessment in the People's Republic of China (PRC). In books, newspaper articles, documentaries and dramas, Republican China has sometimes been portrayed as a vibrant society making remarkable progress in modernization in the face of severe external challenges. This article explores the origins of this surprising rehabilitation and examines in detail how the Republican-era economic legacies have been reassessed in the reform era. It finds that while the post-Mao regime continues to use the negative view of China's pre-communist history to maintain its historical legitimacy, it has also been promoting a positive view of aspects of the same period in order to support its post-1978 priorities of modernization and nationalism, a trend that has persisted under Xi Jinping despite his tightened ideological control. The selective revival of Republican legacies, although conducive to the Party's current political objectives, has given rise to revisionist narratives that damage the hegemony of its orthodox historical discourses, on which its legitimacy still relies.

摘要

在中国共产党的正统史观中，民国时期被视为一个黑暗并充满压迫的时期，是所谓“百年国耻”的一部分。但是，近几十年来，中国大陆对民国时期的评价发生了重大变化。在公开发行的书籍、报纸、纪录片和影视剧中，民国经常被描绘为一个充满活力的社会，在严重的外部挑战下仍然取得了可观的现代化成就。本文致力于探讨这种历史观的惊人转变是如何发生的，并详述民国经济如何在中国改革开放时期受到重新评价。通过研究发现，尽管中共在文革后为维持其历史合法性，仍然负面评价1949年之前的中国社会，但中共也开始有选择地正面评价某些民国时期的遗产，用以支持其改革时期的新重点——现代化和民族主义。即使在习近平加紧意识形态控制后，这种趋势仍在一定程度上持续。对民国遗产的选择性宣传固然有利于中共目前的政治目标，但也导致非官方历史观在中国社会内部广为传播，对中共正统史观及其政权合法性造成冲击。

Keywords: Republican China; Chinese nationalism; Republican fever; Chinese historiography; national identity; official memory; historical reassessment; nostalgia

关键词: 中华民国; 中国民族主义; 民国热; 中国史观; 国家认同; 官方记忆; 重新评价历史; 怀旧

Historians and political scientists have long established that the “Century of National Humiliation” is at the root of contemporary Chinese nationalism.¹ China's humiliating experience at the hands of Western and Japanese imperialists during the century, which began with the Opium War in 1840 and ended with the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, is said to be the

1 Zhao, Suisheng 1998; Gries 2004; Carlson 2009; Callahan 2010; Wang, Zheng 2014.

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foundation of Chinese nationalism today and a key legitimization tool for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).² Notably, the humiliation has in part been blamed on the backwardness of pre-communist Chinese society.³ However, since the start of the reform era, the Republican era (1912–1949), seen as part of the “Century of National Humiliation,” has been the subject of a largely positive reassessment in China and has attracted considerable academic and popular interest. The economic, military, intellectual and political history of the era became “decidedly fashionable” among PRC scholars, media commentators and popular writers.⁴ During the first decade of this century, the fascination with that era reached fever pitch and became known as “Republican fever” (*minguo re* 民国热) in the popular press.⁵ Even under Xi Jinping 习近平, nostalgic portrayals of the pre-communist era have persisted in officially sanctioned media content despite tightened ideological control.⁶

It may seem counterintuitive that Republican China, tarred with the brush of “old China” in the CCP’s official parlance, has been favourably portrayed in the state-controlled media. The CCP bases much of its legitimacy on its “liberation” of China from the Nationalist government in 1949, and its official historiography describes the Republican era as a dark, chaotic and oppressive period. At the same time, China still maintains one of the world’s strictest censorship regimes and public discussions are not permitted to deviate from the official line. China is still, in Louisa Lim’s words, the “People’s Republic of Amnesia,” where the state has successfully prevented most of the population from discussing or even remembering sensitive subjects such as the Tiananmen Massacre.⁷ Under such censorship, why have views of history that are diametrically opposed to the Party’s orthodox historiography been allowed to appear, let alone thrive?

This article explores the changing historiography of Republican China in the PRC during the reform era. It sees the surprising nostalgia for the Republic as a result of the post-Mao regime’s rewriting of the past to serve the needs of the present – a practice that is widespread and deep-rooted in Chinese tradition.⁸ This article argues that the CCP party-state has allowed positive reassessments of certain aspects of the Republican-era legacy because of a profound shift in its ideology and national identity. In the reform era, the Party played down Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, began prioritizing economic development, and replaced class-based mobilization with a Party-centric nationalism.⁹ As a result, China’s national identity gradually evolved from that of a “revolutionary socialist state,” which focused on revolution and class struggle, to that of a “modernizing nationalist state,” by which I mean a state whose main priority is modernization rather than revolution and which promises to defend and further the interests of the whole nation rather than selected classes. While the Party has continued to legitimize one-party rule with the orthodox, revolutionary socialist view of China’s modern history, it has also attempted to justify its reformist and nationalist policies with alternative historical discourses that prioritize modernization and nationalism. The two different historiographical views serve different needs of the party-state, and therefore both are promoted in state propaganda despite their incompatibility with each other. However, this bifurcated historiography has created space for unorthodox views of history to emerge in the popular media.

This article examines how the reassessment took place and what impact it has had on the CCP’s history-related propaganda. In particular, it provides a detailed case study of how the Republic’s economic legacy has been positively reappraised during the reform era and how a space was created

2 Zhao, Suisheng 1998; Gries 2004; Carlson 2009; Callahan 2010; Wang, Zheng 2014.

3 Wang, Yi 2020.

4 Taylor, Jeremy 2009.

5 Zhang, Qiang, and Weatherley 2013b.

6 Chiang and Link 2018.

7 Lim 2014.

8 Unger 1993; Szonyi 2011.

9 Tsang and Cheung 2024, 16.

for revisionist counter-memories to emerge in the state-controlled media. It then analyses the impact of the historical reassessment on the effectiveness of CCP propaganda and the Party's legitimacy. The next section, however, sets the scene with a review of the current literature on Chinese memory politics in connection with the pre-communist era.

Explaining the Nostalgia for Republican China

The nostalgia in the PRC for the Republican era has so far only attracted limited scholarly attention. In their 2013 article, Qiang Zhang and Robert Weatherley documented various manifestations of "Republican fever" in Chinese society, and attributed the phenomenon to the relaxation of restrictions on relevant discussions for reasons of "political expediency," particularly in relation to the CCP's quest for nationalist legitimacy.¹⁰ Simona A. Grano and Yuheng Zhang observed in 2016 that the nostalgic sentiment was particularly strong in Nanjing, the capital of the Nationalist government, where there was an "intense nostalgia for its glorious past."¹¹ Janet Chen noted in 2017 that Republican fever and "the fashion for all things Republican in contemporary popular culture" was bringing "new visibility" to the field of modern Chinese history.¹² Rana Mitter wrote in 2020 that the "Republican craze" had become "fashionable particularly among well-educated urban types who wanted to find an expressive way to communicate their scepticism of the government."¹³

There have been some attempts to explain this Republican nostalgia. Some see it primarily as a liberal intellectual narrative. For example, Louisa Chiang and Perry Link attribute it to two main reasons. On the one hand, mainland Chinese readers, having found out that they had been lied to about China's modern history, had a desire to re-examine the Republican era. On the other hand, legacies of the Republican era, such as liberal intellectual thought, were useful for those who wished to comment on the present.¹⁴ Overseas Chinese commentators have tended to see "Republican fever" as an anti-communist dissident narrative. Hu Ping 胡平, a veteran pro-democracy dissident based in the United States, wrote in 2011 that "Republican fever" in mainland China was "based on the profound recognition of the crimes and wrongdoings by the Communist Party."¹⁵

These are, of course, valid arguments as to why this positive reassessment of Republican China has attracted the attention of wide swathes of Chinese society, especially those who are dissatisfied with CCP rule. However, such analyses fail to explain why CCP censors, who have maintained tight ideological control over historiography, have allowed the re-examination and re-interpretation of pre-1949 history to take place in the first place. To solve the puzzle, this article argues that the rise of Republican nostalgia in China's tightly controlled media environment can be explained in the context of China's evolving national identity and memory politics in the reform era.

Evolving memories amid a national identity shift

According to Duncan Bell, a country can have multiple "nationalist myths," with the state-supported "governing myth" coexisting with and being constantly contested by alternative, "subaltern" myths in the "national mythscape."¹⁶ In China, a communist country where freedom of speech is highly restricted, the space for "subaltern myths" to challenge the CCP's governing myth is very limited. However, as the post-Mao regime gradually developed a new identity narrative

10 Zhang, Qiang, and Weatherley 2013b, 278.

11 Grano and Zhang 2016, 171.

12 Chen 2017, 177.

13 Mitter 2020, 159–168.

14 Chiang and Link 2018.

15 Hu, Ping 2011.

16 Bell 2003.

which was consistent with Western-oriented modernization and pan-Chinese nationalism, the new narrative had to be supported with a new set of governing myths, although these may not necessarily be consistent with the traditional governing myth.

How can a regime create a new set of governing myths? Aleida Assmann has made a useful distinction between the “active memory of the canon,” which “a society has consciously selected and maintains as salient and vital for a common orientation and a shared remembering,” and “archival memory,” which lingers in a state of latency.¹⁷ The borderline between archival and active memory is “permeable in both directions.”¹⁸ When a state needs to create new historical myths to support a new identity narrative, it tends to reinterpret and selectively erase its active memory while selectively activating its archival memory in a way that conforms to the new identity narrative. This is what has been happening in China, where the reform-era CCP has used historical reinterpretation and selective memory activation to serve its new national identity narrative of a modernizing nationalist state.

The existing scholarship has dealt with the CCP’s rewriting of history in its nationalist discourses, most prominently in regard to the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937–1945). During the reform era, the CCP developed a “new remembering” of the war that stressed national unity and included positive reappraisals of the Nationalist war effort, and was aimed at strengthening nationalist education and propaganda and luring the Taiwan-based Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) into supporting reunification.¹⁹ As China rose as a global power in the new millennium, the international dimension of its “historical statecraft” also grew in significance.²⁰ The once dominant narrative of victimhood has been replaced by an assertive narrative of national greatness, which is being used by the Xi regime to justify China’s aspiration for regional hegemony and a greater global role.²¹ But the change in the official paradigm has created space for unofficial memory activists to present “alternative memories” of the war,²² which deviate from the official line and even pose a threat to the regime’s legitimacy.²³

A similar situation exists in the post-Mao regime’s discourse on modernization. As in the case of nationalism, the CCP has also been rewriting Republican China history to serve its reform-era priority of economic modernization. But the current literature has not covered this crucial aspect of Chinese memory politics, and this article seeks to fill this gap.

Reviving the legacies of pre-1949 modernization

Several aspects of China’s pre-communist history are consistent with the goals and priorities of reformist China. In Western scholars’ re-appraisal of Republican China,²⁴ it has been noted that the Republic, especially during the Nanjing decade (1927–1937) under the KMT, bore striking similarities to reform-era PRC.²⁵ In terms of China’s pre-communist modernization efforts, Hans van de Ven has observed that successive Republican governments fostered economic development, sought to consolidate unified bureaucratic rule and advanced “interpretations of Chinese identities that drew from the past as well as from modernity.”²⁶ William Kirby has argued that China’s “internationalization” during the Republican era helped the country move “from being a ward, if not

17 Assmann 2010, 43.

18 Ibid., 44.

19 Waldron 1996; Coble 2007; Mitter 2003.

20 Mayer 2018.

21 Mitter 2020; Chang 2021; 2022.

22 Denton 2019; Lin 2021.

23 Zhang, Qiang, and Weatherley 2013a.

24 Wakeman and Edmonds 2000.

25 Fenby 2003, 505; Taylor, Jay 2009, 595; Mitter and Moore 2011, 229.

26 Van de Ven 2011, 466.

semi-colony, of the ‘great powers’ to being a great power itself.”²⁷ Frank Dikötter has called the Republican era an “age of openness” characterized by international engagement on all levels of society.²⁸ Thomas Rawski rejected the once-dominant view that the Republican era was a period of economic stagnation or decline, and argued instead that significant economic expansion took place, fuelled by both domestic private market forces and foreign participation in the economy.²⁹ The positive effect of economic openness and a market economy is clearly consistent with the central tenets of China’s post-1978 policy.

Driven by reformist policies, Chinese scholars in the early 1980s began to make positive reassessments of the Republican-era economy and business management practices.³⁰ Chinese historians at official think-tanks and universities developed a new paradigm of historical interpretation under which China in the late Qing and Republican periods was depicted as “the beneficiary of the introduction of Western civilization to China rather than a victim of Western imperialism.”³¹ Unlike the Mao-era paradigm, which focused on revolution, the new “modernization paradigm” (*xiandaihua shiguan* 现代化史观) was intended to “prove the historical and logical ‘necessities’ of the capitalist transformation of the Chinese economy in the reform era and its integration with the capitalist world under the grand narrative of a linear process of modernization.”³² Under this paradigm, the study of modern Chinese history began “shifting from a revolutionary history centered on the Communist Party to the history of modernization and the history of the Republic of China.”³³

This new paradigm enjoys a certain level of official support and has attained the status of an alternative governing myth. In the words of Wang Yeyang 王也扬, a historian based at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), China’s current development cannot be separated from its view of history: “What we are doing now cannot be inconsistent with what is written in the history textbooks ... if such a situation exists, then the textbooks need to be amended.”³⁴ However, its incompatibility with the revolutionary paradigm – the Maoist governing myth – has resulted in inconsistencies in official historiography. While the new views of history are allowed and sometimes even promoted in official propaganda, the regime has had to cling on to its old Maoist historiography in order to safeguard its revolutionary legitimacy. As the following case study shows, this has caused the emergence of a bizarre phenomenon in which we witness two opposite views of history coexisting in official propaganda and sometimes conflicting with each other. The contradictory historical interpretations have subsequently created space for nostalgic views of “old China” to emerge in the popular media.

Case Study: The Positive Reappraisal of the Republican-Era Economy

The positive reassessment of the Republican era began almost immediately after Deng Xiaoping’s 邓小平 new leadership launched its economic reforms at the Third Plenum of the 11th CCP Central Committee in 1978. Instead of a Marxist-Leninist state representing workers and peasants in a life-and-death struggle against foreign imperialists and domestic remnants of “exploiting classes,” the PRC in the reform era aimed to unite all Chinese people, including ethnic Chinese capitalists in Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas, to grow its economy with the help of Western technology and foreign capital. As Anne-Marie Brady and He Yong observe, a key propaganda theme in the new era was “economic thought reform,” aimed at persuading Chinese people to accept the new

27 Kirby 1997, 433.

28 Dikötter 2008.

29 Rawski 1989.

30 Wright 1993.

31 Li 2013, 235.

32 Ibid., 26.

33 Liu 2013, 56.

34 Wang, Yeyang 2008. All translations throughout the article are by the author.

economic order.³⁵ Part of the “economic thought reform” agenda was to change the way the economic legacy of the pre-communist era was assessed and represented in official propaganda. In order to legitimize non-state economic elements, including private businesses and foreign capital, which the reformist policies encouraged, CCP propagandists moved to reassess the role of foreign influence on China’s pre-communist economic development and to rehabilitate Republican-era businesspeople.

Rehabilitating the “national bourgeoisie”

Post-Mao reformers aimed to encourage domestic entrepreneurship and to tap into the economic prowess of Chinese business communities outside the PRC. To this end, CCP propagandists played down their conventional demonization of the bourgeoisie and began to talk in positive terms about the legacy of Republican-era businesspeople.

On 25 January 1979, one month after the plenum, Ulanfu 乌兰夫, head of the CCP Central Committee’s United Front Department, announced the Party’s decision on the “national bourgeoisie.” According to this decision, capitalists’ savings and assets that had been confiscated during the Cultural Revolution would be returned, their reduced wages would be increased to previous levels, and those who had technical and managerial skills would be given appropriate positions. Ulanfu said he believed that such measures would “further motivate industrialists and merchants to work for the realization of the ‘four modernizations’.”³⁶ These favourable views of the role of capitalists gradually led to more positive depictions of the legacies of pre-communist businesspeople, including those who had close links to the CCP’s erstwhile archenemies.

During the Republican era, the business community in Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang maintained close links to Chiang Kai-shek’s 蒋介石 Nationalist government.³⁷ Businesspeople from the coastal city of Ningbo 宁波, known collectively as the Ningbo Group, were a particularly important part of this community. The CCP’s official historiography condemned members of this community for being “comprador capitalists” who had collaborated with imperialists to support Chiang’s “counterrevolutionary” regime.³⁸ But shortly after the economic reforms began, Ningbo businesspeople saw their image improve. In an attempt to attract investment from exiled Ningbo merchants, Deng Xiaoping announced at a meeting in Beidaihe 北戴河 on 1 August 1984 that: “All members of the ‘Ningbo Group’ around the world should be mobilized to develop Ningbo.”³⁹ This positive mention by the paramount leader resulted in concrete changes in the way Republican-era Ningbo businesspeople were treated by the local government and official media. Ningbo’s local government rehabilitated the family members of exiles who had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution and returned confiscated property.⁴⁰ Although Republican-era businessmen were still officially condemned for being part of the “comprador” bourgeoisie, official media began to praise the Ningbo Group. For example, *People’s Daily* 人民日报 published a report in February 1986 on the Ningbo Municipal CCP Committee’s efforts to attract overseas

35 Brady and He 2012.

36 “Zai luoshi dang dui minzu zichanjieji zhengce wenti de zuotanhui shang Wulanfu buzhang de jianghua” (Department head Ulanfu’s speech at the forum on implementing the Party’s policy on the national bourgeoisie). *Renmin ribao*, 26 January 1979.

37 Coble 1986; Van de Ven 2003, 125–28.

38 Hu, Sheng 1994, 93–96.

39 “Deng Xiaoping tichu ‘ba quanshijie de Ningbo bang dou dongyuan qilai jianshe Ningbo’” (Deng Xiaoping proposed “all members of the Ningbo Group around the world should be mobilized to develop Ningbo”). *Ningbo ribao*, 23 July 2014, <http://zt.cnnb.com.cn/system/2014/07/23/008119470.shtml>. Accessed 29 February 2024.

40 “Ningbo shi fahui guiqiao qiaojuan de qiaoliang zuoyong” (Ningbo city gives play to the bridging role of returned overseas Chinese and their relatives). *Renmin ribao*, 14 February 1986.

businesspeople back home. The article praised Ningbo businesspeople for both their business acumen and their patriotism and stressed their value to China's development and unity:

The "Ningbo Group" is a force that cannot be overlooked in Ningbo's construction. Members have a glorious tradition of loving the country and loving their hometown; many of them are equipped with a lot of experience and knowledge as well as technical and managerial expertise; they are spread all over the world and have easy access to information, and can therefore adopt the best technologies from various countries; under the influence of the "one country, two systems" policy, many overseas Chinese and those who went to Taiwan have played or are playing a very good role in various ways to facilitate the motherland's reunification.⁴¹

While Ningbo businesspeople have seen the most dramatic reversal in their image in post-Mao PRC, the rehabilitation of the "national bourgeoisie" has been a nationwide phenomenon. For example, Shanxi, a relatively backward, isolated northern province, was previously known primarily as an important wartime CCP base area and the home of Dazhai Village 大寨村, a model of the Maoist rural economy. But in the 1990s, the provincial leadership resurrected and actively promoted the history of "Shanxi merchants" (*jinshang* 晋商), who provided credit and financial services throughout China, as well as to customers in Japan, Russia, Mongolia and Afghanistan, from the late 18th to the early 20th century.⁴²

The reappraisal received a major boost at the turn of the millennium, when the-then CCP general secretary, Jiang Zemin 江泽民, came up with the new ideology of "three represents" (*sange dai-biao* 三个代表), which implied that the CCP should represent the interests of not just workers and peasants but also of private entrepreneurs.⁴³ At the CCP's 16th Party Congress in 2002, the ideology of the "three represents" was written into the Party's Constitution and private entrepreneurs were permitted to join the Party.⁴⁴ This had profound implications for the way private entrepreneurs were depicted in official propaganda. As Shuyu Kong has observed, "As businesspeople and capitalists are now among the Party's most important bases of support and sources of revenue, a crucial part of the propaganda effort is to alter the overwhelmingly negative image of businessmen in the popular imagination."⁴⁵ In the 2000s, Li Changchun 李长春, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee and the CCP's highest official in charge of ideological and propaganda work, repeatedly praised Shanxi's commercial legacy. While meeting with the Shanxi delegation during the annual National People's Congress session in 2006, Li declared the "Shanxi merchant spirit" (*Jinshang jingshen* 晋商精神) to be a provincial treasure and urged the people of Shanxi to "embrace" the spirit and "turn it into a great force."⁴⁶

In Ningbo, pre-communist businesspeople became a key part of the local identity. In 2012, a drama series about Republican-era Ningbo businessmen, *To the East is the Sea* (*Xiangdong shi dahai* 向东是大海), funded and supported by both the Zhejiang provincial government and the Ningbo municipal government, was aired on China Central Television's (CCTV) main channel.⁴⁷ In the same year, in an interview with *People's Daily*, Ningbo's municipal Party secretary, Wang Huizhong 王辉忠, praised the Ningbo Group for its contribution to China's modernization,

41 "Yinren xian yixin" (To attract people, one must first attract their hearts). *Renmin ribao*, 14 February 1986.

42 Goodman 2002.

43 Dickson 2007.

44 Ibid.

45 Kong 2010, 92.

46 Ibid., 90.

47 "Shoubu Ningbo bang tcai shishixing lizuo 'Xiangdong shi dahai' chuangzuo jiemi" (Revealing the secrets of the creation of the first epic drama on the Ningbo group, *To the East is the Sea*). *Ningbo ribao*, 2 March 2012, <http://news.cnnb.com.cn/system/2012/03/02/007254293.shtml>. Accessed 25 February 2024.

including the founding of the first Chinese-run bank, the first insurance company, the first real estate company and the first stock exchange in China, and declared that the spirit of the Ningbo Group, which he claimed included patriotism, a pioneering spirit, openness, honesty and solidarity, must be “inherited and carried forward.”⁴⁸

Reassessing foreign influences in pre-1949 China

Orthodox CCP historiography depicts Republican China as a “semi-colonial” society, and foreign influences during that era, with the exception of the introduction of Marxism-Leninism, are viewed in an extremely negative light. However, once the country embarked on reform and opening up, the role of Western influences in pre-1949 China gradually became the subject of a more nuanced reassessment.

On 31 December 1978, just nine days after the Third Plenum ended, *Guangming ribao* 光明日报, the CCP’s official newspaper for intellectuals, praised the economic thinking of Sun Yat-sen 孙中山, the founder of Republican China, who championed Western-style modernization and advocated the introduction of foreign capital and technology.⁴⁹ In an article entitled “Sun Yat-sen’s thoughts on accelerating the development of the national economy,” Xiamen University 厦门大学 historian Luo Yaojiu 罗耀九 said that Sun “firmly believed that the Chinese people were able to change the country’s backwardness within not too long a period” by “adopting advanced technology as much as possible.”⁵⁰ From then on, praise for Sun’s “openism” became a prominent theme of Sun commemoration events. For example, in a November 1986 editorial marking the 120th anniversary of Sun’s birth, *People’s Daily* praised his international experience and vision, adding that his thoughts on learning from the West “remain greatly enlightening to us today.”⁵¹ These were clear signals that the CCP leadership wanted to overturn the Maoist antipathy towards foreign influences and open up China to foreign investment and technology.

Nowhere was the change in tone more dramatic than in Shanghai. Under Mao, pre-1949 Shanghai was condemned as a “massive semi-feudal and semi-colonial speculative market”⁵² and a “major stronghold of imperialists from various countries invading the whole of China.”⁵³ But in the early 1990s, as the Chinese government decided to restore Shanghai’s position as an international commercial centre, the city’s capitalist past received explicit recognition from China’s top leadership.⁵⁴ In February 1991, when Deng Xiaoping visited Shanghai and listened to Mayor Zhu Rongji’s 朱镕基 report on the development of Shanghai’s Pudong 浦东 area, he declared: “Shanghai used to be a financial centre where currencies could be freely traded. In the future it should be like this, too. If China is to attain an international standing in the field of finance, it must depend on Shanghai first and foremost.”⁵⁵ Deng made it very clear that his reformist vision

48 “Xuexi jicheng hongyang Ningbo bang jingshen, tuijin xiandaihua guoji gangkou chengshi jianshe – fang Zhejiang shengwei changwei, Ningbo shiwei shuji Wang Huizhong” (Study, inherit and carry forward the spirit of the Ningbo Group, push forward the development of a modern international port city – an interview with Wang Huizhong, member of Zhejiang Provincial CCP Committee and Ningbo municipal Party secretary). *Renmin ribao*, 13 April 2012.

49 Bergère 1998, 1.

50 Luo 1978.

51 “Shelun: fuxing Zhongguo wenming de weida xianqu – jinian Sun Zhongshan xiansheng danchen 120 zhounian” (Editorial: a great forerunner in regenerating Chinese civilization – in memory of Mr Sun Yat-sen’s 120th birth anniversary). *Renmin ribao*, 12 November 1986.

52 “Cong Shanghai shichang de gaizao kan youzuzhi shichang de youyuxing” (On the superiority of an organized market from the perspective of the reform of the Shanghai market). *Renmin ribao*, 16 January 1955.

53 “Waitan – diguozhuyi qinlüe zuixing de jianzheng” (The Bund – a witness to the crimes of aggression committed by imperialists). *Renmin ribao*, 12 March 1965.

54 Bergère 2009; Jackson 2017.

55 “Deng Xiaoping kaifang kaifa sixiang yu Shanghai Pudong kaifa” (Deng Xiaoping’s thought on opening up and development and the development of Shanghai’s Pudong). *Renmin ribao*, 14 January 1994.

for Shanghai's future was at least partly inspired by the city's semi-colonial past. Such top-level endorsement for old Shanghai left the door wide open for a nostalgic reassessment of the city's pre-1949 legacy. Its semi-colonial, bourgeois history changed from a political liability into an economic advantage.

In a 1993 article on Shanghai's development of a "socialist market economy," *People's Daily* reporter Xiao Guan'gen 肖关根 wrote that the CCP Central Committee's strategic decision to develop Shanghai into an international economic, financial and trade centre had stoked local people's confidence in "restoring the city's past prestige." Reviewing Shanghai's past, he said: "as early as in the 1930s, [Shanghai] had already been playing the role of an economic centre, financial centre and trade centre in the national economy ... [but this] multi-functional role was weakened in relative terms" after 1949 "under the highly centralized system of the planned economy."⁵⁶ This article in *People's Daily* made it clear that the Party leadership was trying to overcome Maoist legacies and to restore the "multi-functional role" to Shanghai that it had enjoyed in the 1930s. As Hanchao Lu observes, the central government's endorsement of Shanghai's economic growth "allowed the resurgence of at least part of the city's old commercial spirit and cosmopolitanism," and "nostalgia about pre-1949 Shanghai was tolerated and to some extent even encouraged and promoted."⁵⁷

Such nostalgia for the "semi-colonial" past is not limited to Shanghai and can be found nationwide. For example, Harbin's history is inextricably linked to the Chinese Eastern Railway, built by Imperial Russia with a concession from the Qing government.⁵⁸ During the Mao era, the railway was seen as a tool used by Imperial Russia to "suck blood from the people for the lavish enjoyment of the czar and the Russian ruling class."⁵⁹ But in the 1990s, the same history was used to tout Harbin's status as a "city of openness." According to an article published in *People's Daily* in November 1991:

Ninety years ago, after the Chinese Eastern Railway connected China and Russia, 16 countries set up consulates in Harbin, and more than 30 countries established banks here. The wind of modern civilization blew into Harbin, making her prosperous and bustling and earning her the reputation for being an "Oriental Moscow."⁶⁰

After China finally joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the legacy of China's pre-communist international interactions gained even more prominence. In 2010, such legacies were used to promote a major national project, the World Expo in Shanghai, which took place from 1 May to 31 October 2010. State propaganda at the time portrayed the Expo as the fulfilment (led by the CCP) of a century-old Chinese dream.⁶¹ For example, the Xinhua News Agency published an article on the opening day of the Expo under the headline: "Shanghai Expo: after a century-long journey, China fulfils its dream."⁶² The article reviewed China's participation in World Expos during the late-Qing and Republican eras, focusing particularly on the Panama-Pacific International Exposition held in San Francisco in 1915: "at this Expo, China broke several records ... the biggest number of exhibits, the biggest exhibition space and the biggest number of awards." It emphasized that China's award-winning products in 1915 were mostly agricultural products and that China was

⁵⁶ Xiao 1993.

⁵⁷ Lu 2002, 169.

⁵⁸ Wang, Chin-Chun 1925.

⁵⁹ "Guanyu yijiao Zhongguo Changchun tielu" (About the handover of China's Changchun railway). *Renmin ribao*, 21 February 1950.

⁶⁰ "Beiguo 'xiadu'" (The 'summer capital' in the north). *Renmin ribao*, 15 November 1991.

⁶¹ Nordin 2012.

⁶² "Shanghai shibohui: bainian changlu, Zhongguo yuanmeng" (Shanghai Expo: a hundred-year long journey, China fulfils its dream). *Xinhua*, 1 May 2010, <https://www.jiaodong.net/news/system/2010/05/01/010825070.shtml>. Accessed 27 February 2024.

still an impoverished agrarian economy at the time. The article attributed the fulfilment of the “Expo dream” to the CCP’s reform and opening up. It is particularly noticeable that, typically of propaganda pieces on the Shanghai Expo, the article made no mention of the Communist revolution or the Mao era, and connected the modernization drive of contemporary China directly to the pre-communist era.⁶³

Challenging the Economic Orthodoxy

The above sections show that while the Party propagandists never gave up on revolutionary orthodoxy, they nevertheless adopted some ideas from the modernization paradigm, such as the positive roles of the bourgeoisie and Western influence, expressing such sentiments in pro-reform propaganda transmitted via authoritative media outlets such as the *People’s Daily*, *Guangming Daily* and CCTV. Once these most heavily controlled media outlets started to reassess Republican-era economic legacies positively, the less strictly censored, more market-oriented newspapers and magazines began to do the same, and they often went much further.

For example, when discussing Chinese entrepreneurial traditions in *Nanfang renwu zhouban* 南方人物周刊 (*Southern People Weekly*) in 2009, Fu Guoyong 傅国涌, a well-published popular historian of Republican China, praised the “exemplary good traditions” created by late Qing and Republican-era businesspeople and lamented that during the “socialist reform” in the 1950s, “the whole entrepreneurial class was uprooted, the chain of history was cut off and everything was reset to zero.”⁶⁴ Fu was actually suggesting that the Communist revolution hampered, rather than facilitated, China’s economic modernization.

As mentioned above, Thomas Rawski’s *Economic Growth in Prewar China* presents a very positive assessment of the Chinese economy before the outbreak of war in 1937. In October 2009, Zhejiang University Press published a Chinese translation of the book.⁶⁵ Mao Likun 毛立坤, a history lecturer at Nankai University and one of the translators of the book, contributed an article to *Nanfang dushi bao* 南方都市报 (*Southern Metropolis Daily*), entitled “During the 50 years before the war, the economy was also remarkable.”⁶⁶ Summarizing Rawski’s findings, the author wrote: “China was one of the few underdeveloped countries that achieved economic growth in that era. Pre-war economic growth laid the foundation for Chinese economic development afterwards, including after 1949.”⁶⁷ CCP propaganda has always attributed China’s economic development after the CCP took power to the Party itself; this article, however, argued that, regardless of the Party’s achievements after 1949, some credit should be given to the economic foundation laid during the pre-communist era.

Such arguments were by no means rare. Addressing a forum held in Beijing in 2010 by the liberal-leaning Caixin Media group 财新传媒, Professor Yuan Weishi 袁伟时, a veteran historian at the Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, pointed out that under the rule of the Beijing government (1912–1927), China also experienced rapid economic growth, with average annual industrial growth of 13.8 per cent over the decade after the 1911 Revolution. According to Yuan, China’s achievements over the previous 30 years were nothing more than a return to the past.⁶⁸

In the same vein, Qin Hui 秦晖, a history professor at Tsinghua University, wrote in the Guangzhou-based liberal newspaper *Nanfang zhoumo* 南方周末 (*Southern Weekly*) in 2011 that China’s economic growth rate from 1911 to 1937 was no lower than the average growth rate in the world or that of most Western powers at that time, and was no lower than China’s growth rate during the 20-year period from the 1957 “Anti-rightist” campaign to the beginning of the

63 Ibid.

64 Fu 2009.

65 Rawski 2009.

66 Mao 2009.

67 Ibid.

68 “Huishou xinhai bainian” (Reviewing the century since the 1911 Revolution). *Zhongguo gaige*, November 2010, <http://magazine.caixin.com/2010-10-30/100193870.html>. Accessed 27 February 2024.

reform era. It was exactly during the Republican era, Qin maintained, that China's industrial development and economic growth surpassed that of India, although the large-scale destructive wars that started in 1937 set China's development back.⁶⁹ Qin Hui openly suggested that the economic performance of pre-war China, viewed in orthodox historiography as dark and impoverished, was actually better than that of socialist China under Mao.

These arguments are clearly inconsistent with the traditional CCP orthodoxy, which depicted China in the Republican era as impoverished, stagnant and in need of rescuing by the CCP. But despite the potential challenge posed by these views to the Party orthodoxy, they were sometimes allowed to be published, as the above discussions demonstrate. This suggests that the Central Propaganda Department was not holding up the traditional revolutionary paradigm as the only legitimate view of history. Although the revolutionary paradigm needed to be defended in order to maintain the historical foundation of the CCP's legitimacy, the modernization paradigm was also useful to the Party's policy priority of promoting economic modernization. As CASS historian, Bu Ping 步平, wrote in *Guangming Daily* in 2009, the debate over "paradigms" in modern Chinese history, although intense, did not result in the dominance of one over the other, because neither side negated the value of the other.⁷⁰

Revisionist Views Persisting under Xi

Such "ideological pluralism within bounds,"⁷¹ which characterized much of the reform era, has faced increasing restrictions since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, as ideological controls have become progressively tighter and criticisms of the so-called "historical nihilism" have increased.⁷² For example, in 2013, *Renmin luntan* 人民论坛 (*The People's Tribune*), a *People's Daily* journal, published an article entitled, "Resist the nihilistic ideological trend and stick to the socialist path with Chinese characteristics."⁷³ The author, Deng Qiuping 邓秋萍, a politics professor at an obscure vocational college in Guangdong, wrote:

Without doubt, calls for replacing the "revolutionary paradigm" with the "modernization paradigm" and replacing the "materialistic historiography" with the "modernization historiography" are not academic viewpoints or paradigms for thinking, but are fundamentally theories that cater to the needs of the political conspiracy against scientific socialism by evil forces hostile to Chinese socialism.⁷⁴

Despite the critical voices, however, depictions of the pre-communist era have not reverted completely to the "century of humiliation" discourse. Although liberal-leaning intellectuals in the Xi era can no longer openly praise Republican China at the expense of the PRC, the underlying interpretive prism – the modernization paradigm – remains in use, as it is still consistent with CCP policies. For example, *The Stories of Concessions* (Wudadao 五大道), a documentary series produced by the propaganda department of the Tianjin Municipal CCP Committee, CCTV and Tianjin TV and Radio, was aired on the CCTV documentary channel in 2014. It tells the story of Wu Da Dao, a historical district in Tianjin, which formed part of the British concession from 1860 to 1943.⁷⁵ A

69 Qin 2011.

70 Bu 2009.

71 Cheung 2023.

72 Tsang and Cheung 2024, 83–84.

73 Deng 2013.

74 Ibid.

75 "Jilupian Wudadao quanjingshi fanying Tianjin jindai bainian lishi" (The documentary *The Stories of Concessions* offers panoramic view of Tianjin's 100-year modern history). *Tianjin ribao*, 8 October 2014, <http://jishi.cntv.cn/2014/10/08/ART11412731714466491.shtml>. Accessed 27 February 2024.

People's Daily commentary on the documentary acknowledged that “Tianjin used to be a wound in Chinese history that was very slow to heal” and that “for quite a long time, the strong sense of national humiliation forced us to see that history only through the lens of condemnation.” However, the article went on to say that “Tianjin has now become an international metropolis” and that, looking at history from today’s perspective, the documentary has been able to “give up the simplistic condemnatory stance and calmly depict and explain the changing face of a city.”⁷⁶ According to the author, Tianjin can be seen as a metaphor of a “unique gene” of modern Chinese culture – “under intense Western impact, China changed her isolationist policies and embarked upon a path of continuous self-improvement.”⁷⁷ The focus here, therefore, is not on China’s humiliation but on the positive impact of foreign influences on regional development and modernization.

The continued invocation of Republican-era legacies was most notable in propaganda around the new Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which Xi unveiled in October 2013.⁷⁸ Eager to take advantage of this ambitious plan for closer regional economic integration, some localities mobilized their pre-1949 links with foreign countries to boost their future prospects of increased openness. For example, remote Yunnan province in south-west China, designated as a “bridgehead” in developing links with South and South-East Asia, highlighted its advantages in the BRI project with references to the province’s pre-communist history.⁷⁹ A 2014 article published in *People's Daily* noted that Sun Yat-sen proposed building a Yunnan–Burma railway in *The International Development of China*, his blueprint for China’s future, and lamented that the cross-border rail project was derailed because of the Second World War.⁸⁰ The article went on to detail Yunnan’s recent efforts to build an “international transport corridor,” which it said “laid a solid foundation for its integration into the BRI strategy.” In so doing, it linked Yunnan’s current development strategy to the pre-communist era and suggested the province was simply back on track following a trajectory already set during the Republican era.

Similarly, the colonial legacy of Qingdao, a city under German and Japanese control for much of the Republican era, has come to be viewed as a positive factor in its role as a “node” in the BRI. For example, a 2017 article published in the Overseas Edition of *People's Daily* attributed Qingdao’s status as a burgeoning financial centre partly to its history: “As early as a hundred years ago, Qingdao was endowed with powerful ‘financial genes.’ In the 1920s and 1930s, Qingdao was a place where foreign banks concentrated and had become one of the financial centres in the Far East.”⁸¹ The article made special mention of the city’s German links, calling the Deutsch-Asiatische Bank, which was established in Qingdao in 1898, “the foreign bank with the deepest ties with Qingdao.” Commenting on the 2013 opening of a Deutsche Bank branch and the 2015 opening of a branch of Allianz China Life Insurance, the article proclaimed that “Germany and Qingdao have completed a financial reunion that has spanned a hundred years.” Notably, the article made no mention of colonization or occupation, and portrayed Qingdao’s foreign links in purely positive terms.

Such commentaries have been published despite the intensifying crackdown on unorthodox historical views, including positive views of the Republican era. In a 2019 article criticizing “historical nihilism,” Xia Chuntao 夏春涛, Party secretary of the CASS’s Institute of Modern History, wrote, “If the Republic was really that good, then what was the basis and significance of our Party’s leadership in the revolution and founding of New China?”⁸² Likewise, in a March 2021 article, Wang Junwei 王均伟, director of the Academic and Editorial Committee of the CCP Central

76 Zhang, Tongdao 2014.

77 Ibid.

78 Yu 2017.

79 Summers 2018, 89–91.

80 Chu, Liu and Zhang 2014.

81 Zhao, Wei 2017.

82 Xia 2019, 8.

Committee's Institute of Party History and Literature, lambasted positive views of the Nationalist economy during the so-called "golden decade" (*huangjin shinian* 黄金十年) – the relatively peaceful period between 1927 and 1937. Calling the reassessment "sinister," he asked, "If that was a 'golden decade,' then what would have been the point of the Chinese Communists' struggles and resistance during that period? Wouldn't they have been criminals sabotaging the country's development and construction?"⁸³

Given the tightening political environment, the space for favourable reassessments of pre-communist legacies has been dramatically reduced. However, positive mentions of the Republican-era economy have not completely disappeared. In June 2022, CCTV's business channel broadcast a talk by Zhang Baichun 张柏春, a senior researcher at the Institute for the History of Natural Sciences of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), in which he praised the "remarkable" industrial heritage of the Republic: "Now, many people are proud of Huawei ... Is Huawei the first exemplary Chinese enterprise? In fact, there were such enterprises during the late Qing and Republican periods."⁸⁴ Zhang was comparing pre-1949 businesses to the jewel in the crown of 21st-century PRC industry. The fact that the broadcast was aired on one of China's most authoritative propaganda platforms, at a time when the campaign against "historical nihilism" had become a hallmark of Xi's rule, shows how profoundly Chinese public discourse has been impacted by revisionist views of the Republic.

Conclusion

This article highlights the conflicted nature of post-Mao China's national identity and propaganda. After reform was launched, the PRC started to play down its traditional identity as a revolutionary socialist state and develop a new national identity as a modernizing nationalist state. In so doing, the regime began to reinterpret modern Chinese history in ways that would serve this new identity, but it also continued to use the orthodox historical discourse to defend its historical legitimacy. In other words, the party-state has been using two diametrically opposed views of history to serve different needs. The rival historiographies have inevitably come into conflict with each other.

What implications do the conflicted identity narratives of the Party have for its legitimacy? Particularly since Tiananmen, the CCP has been emphasizing its own role as the paramount patriotic force and guardian of national pride in order to use nationalism as a major basis of its legitimacy.⁸⁵ Allen Carlson concludes that history plays a central role in framing the content of modern Chinese nationalism, and this historical anchor, largely shaped by the CCP regime, has three main points – a sense of superiority derived from the past greatness of imperial China, an equally endemic memory of the "century of national humiliation" and the CCP's "valiant efforts" to save China from humiliation.⁸⁶

But the positive reassessment of pre-communist China, especially Republican China, means that two of these three points, which are key to the CCP's nationalist historical discourse, are being challenged. While the "century of humiliation" narrative describes pre-communist China as hopelessly impoverished, corrupt and oppressive, the new historical narrative recognizes that significant efforts were made during the pre-communist period to reform, develop and modernize China. While the CCP's orthodox version of history stresses "only the CCP could have saved China," the new historical narrative recognizes the significant contribution made by various non-communist actors to defending and modernizing the country. As a result, the new narrative about China's modern

83 Wang, Junwei 2021.

84 Zhang, Baichun 2022.

85 Zhao, Suisheng 1998; Hughes 2006, 55–58.

86 Carlson 2009.

history, which has been allowed and sometimes even championed by the CCP itself, is undermining the Party's monopoly on Chinese nationalism and is eroding its legitimacy.

CCP propagandists now see "Republican fever" as a major threat to the Party's legitimacy, but this threat has been created by the CCP's own propaganda machine. As a result of its continuing confusion over ideology and national identity, the Party has found it impossible to crush "Republican fever," despite the perceived seriousness of the threat. Therefore, despite Xi's intensified crackdown on "historical nihilism," the popular nostalgia for Republican China looks set to continue haunting the regime in the foreseeable future.

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