Nationalities Papers (2025), 1–17
doi:10.1017/nps.2024.80

ARTICLE

Chosen Glory and Chosen Trauma with Chinese Characteristics: Social Representations of History in an Authoritarian Context

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Abstract

There is tension between manipulation of national identity construction and agency in the literature on ingroup identification, especially in authoritarian contexts. In China, the past is very relevant with regards to legitimacy of the Communist Party. Yet, we cannot just assume that what the state propagates is what can also be found at the bottom-up level. This article analyses social representations of history in China combining the top-down perspective of state education policies and curated historical narratives to the bottom-up perspective formed through analyzing two student surveys, collected first in 2007 and again in 2011-2012, and 11 interviews. Earlier research indicates that in most countries representations of history concentrate on negative issues and their time span is short. Chinese representations of history are divided into narratives of glory and humiliation, and respondents have a much longer perspective to national history than typical participants in international surveys. Finally, although problematic periods such as the Cultural Revolution get less coverage in political speeches and school textbooks, they are not forgotten among students. Furthermore, the view that people should have their own ideas about history and China rather than having to adopt the government promoted narrative was visible in multiple student interviews.

Keywords: China; social representations of history; national identity; patriotic education; chosen glory and chosen trauma

Introduction

In the absence of elections, nationalism is a powerful source of legitimacy for the CCP, used instrumentally to maintain national cohesion. In the dominant narratives, China's problematic history with Japan and certain Western countries are used to direct attention against external enemies. These narratives are certainly not new but continue to stay relevant. When Xi Jinping came to power, he introduced two new national holidays, Victory Day of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression celebrated in early September and National Memorial Day in December, which commemorates the Nanjing massacre (Zhao 2023). Similarly to earlier regimes, Xi's regime has promoted patriotic education, defined the essence of patriotism to consist of love for the Party and socialism and found it important to propagate 'the correct view of history' (正确的历史观) (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China 2019). In 2017, President Xi decided that it is time to return to using a single series of history textbooks, written, and approved by the Ministry of Education.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.80 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While the dominant historical narratives and a Party-directed definition for patriotism can be identified in Party documents and to a certain extent in school textbooks, many studies make claims about the effectiveness of the top-down propaganda without looking at the bottom-up perspective empirically. Such single-level characterizations constitute only a partial understanding of the role representations of history play in China's national identity construction. More generally, focusing on the elite level without discussing how citizens receive nationalist politics has been identified as one among many blind spots in the study of Chinese nationalism and national identity dynamics (Stroup 2023). We cannot just assume that what the state propagates is what can also be found at the bottom-up level. Content of representations of history is a topic that should be studied empirically, and it can provide interesting insights into human thinking. There are some recent examples using empirical data showcasing that Party directed education can be counterproductive to the Party's goals, but such studies are in the minority (Hsu et al. 2022).

This article analyses social representations of history in China combining the top-down perspective of state education policies and other forms of curating the Chinese historical narratives to the bottom-up perspective formed through analyzing two student surveys and 11 student interviews. Chinese university students constitute an interesting group to analyze because they have been subject to patriotic education, and the state has created an effective system for controlling students (Wang 2012; Yan 2014). On the other hand, their educational background has provided students with more information on many issues in comparison to the less educated parts of the population. As the surveys analyzed in this article were collected in 2007 and 2011–12, just before Xi Jinping's ascent to power, they can provide a point of comparison for subsequent studies, although collecting such datasets in today's political climate in China would be very difficult.

On a broader level, Chinese social representations of history help to illustrate understudied and undertheorized themes in social sciences. By presenting a state-led approach to historical representations jointly with a grass-roots perspective in an authoritarian context, this research contributes to the debate on agency in the formation of social representations of history. In addition, it looks at the content of historical representations. Earlier research indicates that in most countries representations of history concentrate on negative issues and their time span is short (Liu 1999). Representations of both glory and trauma and dynastic history present in the Chinese data fit only partly in the picture painted by earlier research, which raises new questions for future studies.

Theoretical framework

Debating agency in the construction of historical representations

A common past, preserved through institutions, traditions, and symbols, is a crucial instrument in the construction of collective identities in the present. Olick (1999, 342) sees the processes of remembering and forgetting as performative: simultaneously as people remember as members of a group, the act of *re-member-ing* constitutes these very groups. In the era of nation-states, states want to influence what is remembered and how. In the processes of selecting what is forgotten and what is remembered 'the past is being continually re-made, reconstructed in the interest of the present,' as Bartlett puts it in his seminal study *Remembering* (Bartlett 1932, 309). Widely shared perceptions of the past shape the narrative people tell about themselves, linking past, present and future (Bell 2006, 2; Liu and Hilton 2010, 537). As the past is necessarily constructed, what nations choose to remember and forget are telling examples of their values and perceptions (Gong 2002, 26). Thus, from the perspective of values and perceptions, felt or perceived history matters more than chronological or factual history (Guibernau 2007, 12). Remembering and forgetting structures also vary according to national conditions and shape the ways history issues affect policy (Gong 2002, 30).

In most countries a group's representation of its history builds heavily on a central master narrative, which provides a foundational myth for the society and legitimizes existing power

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structures. Liu and Hilton refer to such master narratives as *charters.* They note that all peoples do not have a consensual social representation of their history, let alone a hegemonic charter. Charters are not only about self-understanding or in-group identification as they provide an agenda for future actions (Liu and Hilton 2010; see also Seixas 2004, 10).

Although the constructed nature of the past applies to all countries, social scientific research on historical representations tends to debate agency. That is, how much agency individuals or the population are thought to have with regards to their views of national history. Historical narratives strengthen ingroup identification and define the boundaries of ingroup and outgroups (Seixas 2004, 5–6). Social identity theory (SIT) sees people's inherent 'groupness' and creation of boundaries between 'us' and 'them' as natural. In contrast, studies in politics reveal ways in which 'othering' is used for political purposes, portraying acts emphasizing differences between ingroups and outgroups as artificial and manipulative. Political leaders are well-aware that a common threat from outgroups increases ingroup cohesion and loyalty, and conveniently directs attention away from internal issues (Brewer 1999; Klymenko and Siddi 2020). Propaganda campaigns manifest that there are ways to influence identity coherence at the group level. The tension between manipulation of national identity construction and agency is very much emphasized when we look at identity formation in an authoritarian context such as China and the role historical representations have in national identity construction.

Nationalist historical beliefs are thought to form a vital part of Chinese national identity. In understanding contemporary Chinese national identity construction, extant literature has concentrated on the role of nationalism as a political ideology aiming to form a common national identity. There is wide agreement on the fact that using nationalism to shore up legitimacy has helped Chinese leaders to increase their domestic support in authoritarian conditions in which legitimacy is not based on elections (Downs and Saunders 1999; Zhao 2004; He 2009; Zheng 2008). Here, Chinese history and the CCP's role in it is used to propagate a narrative increasing CCP's legitimacy. Still, literature on national identity in China tends to be polarized to those emphasizing state's coercive power and to those claiming that despite centralized power and strong state apparatus, people have agency even in an authoritarian context.

Proponents of the 'top-down approach' view nationalism instrumentally as something that can be used to manipulate the masses (Zhao 2004; Zhao 2013; Zheng 1999, 12; Wang 2012, 10–11). This approach has been dominant in the debate on national identity construction starting from Dittmer and Kim's seminal book *China's Quest for National Identity* in which they argue that 'The state, with its legitimate monopoly of violence and its controlling interest in terms of manipulating the national symbol system, plays a determining role in the construction and management of national identity dynamic' (Dittmer and Kim 1993, 244). The CCP's concern about its legitimacy deficit and attempt to overcome it by shaping national identity can be seen in Jiang Zemin's patriotic education policies, which Wang accuse for the 'rising nationalism among young people' in China (Wang 2012, 10–11). The 'bottom-up approach' points out that merely focusing on government repression denies agency on the societal level by dismissing popular opinion as irrelevant and viewing significant resistance as impossible (Callahan 2004, 2006, 2010; Gries 2001; Gries and Rosen 2004).

Despite state efforts to curate representations of history, the state institutions cannot have a monopoly of information production in the information age. The role of the mass media in disseminating information related to history has changed the ways history is present in people's everyday life and participated in creating new uses for history as a cultural product. In China, red tourism concentrating on visiting places significant in the history of Chinese communism, has been on the increase since the early 2000s (Li and Hu 2008). In the internet sphere, commercial actors try to profit from patriotic sentiments, sometimes clashing with the Party-state (Zhang and Ma 2023). There is a great deal of variance with regards to history consumption in different countries. Even in authoritarian states economic growth has diversified the use of history in society.

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Chosen trauma and chosen glory

A master narrative solidifying existing power structures can certainly help the ruling elite, but foundational myths also include more puzzling elements. Mock states that 'Violent death can be found, in some form or another, at the core of nearly every society's foundational myth' (Mock 2012, 66). While some of such myths deal with victorious battles, a significant part handles defeat. Selecting negative events at the core of national master narratives raises the question, why a national ideology, 'whose purpose is to reinforce the strength and legitimacy of the nation and its efficacy as a means to identity and political autonomy,' would build its foundational myths on stories of conquest and humiliation (Mock 2012, 6)?

In the Chinese case, 'hundred years of national humiliation' (百年国耻) is often defined as China's foundational myth (Callahan 2004; Wang 2012). It has long roots – in the early 20th century Chinese even celebrated national humiliation (Callahan 2004, 210). The humiliating era covers the First Opium War (1839-1842), the Second Opium War (1856-1860), the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the invasion of the allied forces of eight countries (1900), the Japanese invasion of Manchuria (1931) and the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945) (Wang 2012, 48). In the international context, Chinese concentration on 'hundred years of national humiliation' is not an isolated case, but one among many chosen traumas of large groups functionally similar to the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 for Serbians, fall of Constantinople in 1453 for the Greek, the Battle of White Mountain in 1620 for the Czech and Yaa Asantewaa's failed rebellion against British colonial rule in Ghana in 1900 (Mock 2012, 2–5; Volkan 2014, 24–25).

Volkan has researched the prevalence of traumas and glorified stories in national narratives. Chosen glories increase collective self-esteem, and Volkan defines them as 'shared mental representations of a historical event and heroic persons attached to it that are heavily mythologized over time' (Volkan 2014, 25). Volkan sees chosen traumas as stronger large-group markers than chosen glories. He explains that this is because chosen traumas involve more complex emotions (Volkan 2005).

The role(s) of violence in increasing ingroup coherence are complex and manyfold involving mixed and contradictory emotional responses. Embryonic forms of present-day culture of chosen traumas as core building blocks of national identity can be traced back to hunter-gatherer tribes, who learned to deal with the need to control the use of violence as well as guilt associated with its use. For example, animals hunted for food became worshipped totem animals, who were begged for forgiveness before they were killed. Totem animals also came to symbolize the tribe (Mock 2012, 50–91).

Violence and its control are at the heart of survival of human communities as the largest threat comes from within the community in the form of violence among in-group members. 'At the large-group level, people need enemies to prevent aggression from turning inward in their large group, to maintain a favorable large-group identity, and to establish peace in their large group' (Volkan 2014, 28). Rules about when violence is accepted protect the in-group. Durkheimian instrumentalist take on religion sees its primary function in enforcing social order by providing rules for uses of violence (Mock 2012, 52–53). Durkheim's follower Halbwachs continued to study the role of religion in society and came to emphasize the role of collective memory as a group identifier. Halbwachs noted that religious rites are largely commemorative in nature and religions such as Christianity focus on remembering the life and teachings of their leading figures. (Halbwachs 1992). In other words, religions utilized commemoration for increasing in-group coherence before nation-states.

Violence in foundational myths tends to also encourage individuals to sacrifice themselves, even their own life, for the common good. Expecting such behavior from individuals is linked with the functions group identity provides for its members. Smith characterizes nations as a kind of religion, which brings continuity and helps to overcome the idea of personal oblivion. 'Identification with the nation in a secular era is the surest way to surmount the finality of death and ensure a measure of personal immortality' (Smith 1991, 160–161).

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Over time, chosen memories of trauma can be socially institutionalized and become part of individual and collective identities (Kinnvall 2002). Still, national master narratives are far from static. Forgetting and omissions are part of their construction as they must evolve to frame responses to new challenges (Liu and Hilton 2010, 538). There appears to be several reasons for changes in the content of master narratives. Traumatic events may be too traumatic for the generation that experienced them leading into transgenerational transmission. Although many factors in the social environment shape the ways people approach the past, it is often generalized that survivors are too close to the events to begin working with mourning and overcoming the events, but the second generation has another chance to process the issues and to come in terms with the past (Wydra 2013, 31). Transgenerational transmission of shared trauma takes place, when the group cannot deal with its feelings of helplessness and humiliation and transfers these unfinished psychological tasks to future generations (Volkan 2014, 57). In addition, rise of new narrative templates relates to national identity dynamics, some of which are clearly politically orchestrated. In the 1980s, Slobodan Milosevic stirred national sentiments by declaring Prince Lazar a saint and touring his body around the country, as well as building huge monuments to commemorate the battle of Kosovo. Years of boosting Serbian nationalism were followed by among others, the Srebrenica genocide in 1989 (Volkan 2014, 89–97; see also Mock 2012, 2–3 and 155–231).

In the Chinese case, existing literature has identified a war memory 'curve': during the years of Mao when China was relatively weak, the dominant narrative focused on class struggle and the role of the CCP in defending China (Gao 2016; Dian 2017, 192–213). CCP's role is codified in the preamble of the Chinese constitution (1982). Unlike constitutions of most Western liberal democracies, it does not start with defining individuals' liberties and rights or a value-laden description of the kind of society the state institutions aim to create. Instead, it starts with a historical account of China's development since 1840 and explains how China became a socialist country. The description of the desired society comes only after the historical narrative and is defined in terms of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The narrative promoted in the preamble culminates into year 1949, when

> 'The Chinese people of all nationalities led by the Communist Party of China with Chairman Mao Zedong as its leader ultimately, in 1949, overthrew the rule of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat-capitalism, won a great victory in the New-Democratic Revolution and founded the People's Republic of China. Since then, the Chinese people have taken control of state power and become masters of the country.' (The National Congress of the People's Republic of China 1982)

Although estimates of casualties during the Sino-Japanese War reach up to 20 million and around 100 million Chinese were dislocated at some point of the war, it was dealt with in a cursory manner publicly and in education during the Mao years (Mitter 2003). In the early 1990s, China's national identity discourse shifted from emphasizing the victor narrative to one highlighting Chinese victimhood in the hands of foreign aggressors, and the Anti-Japanese War became the core of the national humiliation narrative. This discursive shift in the 1990s indicates changes in national identity dynamics (Callahan 2004, 2010).

Adopting a victim status served multiple purposes both in the domestic and international realms. In *China's Good War*, Mitter explains why the Sino-Japanese war became China's dominant narrative for new Chinese nationalism. It had the advantage of not being the fault of the Chinese unlike many other major events in the 20th century such as the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution. In the 1990s economic growth was slowly taking off, and economically the country was in much better shape than at any point between 1949 and 1976. Yet the CCP needed to strengthen its legitimacy and new nationalism served this purpose (Mitter 2020).

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In the international realm, China's changing international status also contributes to explaining the somewhat sudden rise of the national humiliation narrative. In the 1990s China was trying to improve its image after the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, which led to international sanctions. Moreover, it aimed at reducing US and Japanese power in East Asia (Mitter 2003). Talking about past humiliations served the efforts to turn the discourse towards a moral argument for more power and prestige for China in the present and future. As the Chinese example demonstrates, self-assigned victim status does not necessarily indicate weakness, rather it 'provides strength vis-a`-vis the international community, which usually tends to support the victimized side in the conflict' (Bar-Tal et al. 2009, 241).

Empirical context

Patriotic and history education in China

Changing social representations of history are reflected in the content of history textbooks and education more broadly. History education varies according to national practices and goals and can be a powerful instrument in promoting dominant historical representations. In China, schools and universities have a legal obligation to transmit specific socio-political values to students, and teachers are required to assess how well students have absorbed the required information (Fairbrother 2005; Law 2006). Teachers and their attitudes and values are also under surveillance: Chinese Ministry of Education undertakes surveys on their attitudes to find out their views on the principles of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Zhang and Liu 2005, 85).

Historical narratives are core content of China's patriotic education campaign. Shift in national identity discourse in the 1990s resulted in a nationwide campaign, which utilizes China's humiliating experiences in the hands of foreign powers, offers one CCP dictated version for how to love China and tends to stir up anti-Japanese sentiments. Zhao names Chinese tradition and history, territorial integrity and national unity as the broader themes that have been dominant in the patriotic education campaign (Zhao 2004, 9). Cultural governance in all its forms is the core of patriotic education. According to Zhao, the study of China's modern history underlined things such as being invaded by imperialists, and China's national characteristics (国情), especially as they are purported to be incompatible with Western democratic values (Zhao 2004, 223–231).

History teaching on all levels includes goals of enhancing patriotism among children and young people. Regarding compulsory education, the 2001 History Curriculum Standards for Full-time Compulsory Education (trial) state that history education should teach students to 'gradually understand China's national characteristics', and to 'cultivate patriotic feelings' (Chinese Ministry of Education 2001). For high school students, History Curriculum Standards for Ordinary High Schools from 2003 also list 'stimulating a sense of pride--- and fostering patriotism' among the purposes of teaching (Chinese Ministry of Education 2003a, 5). Outline of Modern Chinese History, a compulsory ideological course at the undergraduate level defines 'further enhancing national self-esteem, self-confidence, and pride' among its goals and wants the students to 'understand the historical inevitability of the Chinese people embarking on the socialist road with the Communist Party as its leader' (Writing team of the Higher Education Press 2009).

In the 1990s, after the Party's new education guidelines were made, new history textbooks came out and the theme of national humiliation gained emphasis. The first history textbook since 1937 emphasizing national humiliation was published in 1990 as part of 'History, Patriotism, and Socialism' books (Callahan 2006, 186). In the 1950s and 1960s textbooks emphasised the victories of the Communist troops and downplayed the Kuomintang's role in fighting against the Japanese in line with the CCP's general approach to history. The main emphasis was on slandering the Kuomintang rather than condemning the Japanese actions (He 2009, 136–138; Rose 2013). This emphasis shifted in the 1990s and memories of Japan's past aggression have since been systematically used as part of the patriotic education campaign to shift the focus of the youth from domestic

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problems and redirect protest toward the foreigner as an enemy, as an external 'other' (Callahan 2006, 185–186; Hughes 2006, 147).

While patriotic education campaign affected content of history education, there have also been other factors shaping history textbooks. In 2001, the Ministry of Education published the Compendium of Curriculum Reform for Basic Education (Experimental), which somewhat diversified the textbook markets. Even then, publishers had to seek approval from the Ministry of Education for books aimed for national use or from the provincial textbook review commission for books intended for local use (OECD 2016). Before the 2001 reform, textbook production was centralised, except for Shanghai, which is an independent experimental area of curriculum reform set up by the Ministry of Education in the late-1980s (Yin 2013). Despite continued political control, publisher diversification in the 2000s enabled local experiments, and a popular education philosophy, the so-called 'quality-oriented education' (素质教育), further influenced education objectives emphasizing the importance of teaching critical thinking skills and criticizing memorization (Vickers and Yang 2013/2014; Yin 2013). As mentioned in the introduction, China returned to using a single series of history textbooks in 2017.

Vickers and Yang studied three editions of senior high history textbooks used in Shanghai from 1995, 2004 and 2007. The 2004 edition tested a thematic approach in history teaching instead of the traditional chronological approach, and integrated Chinese history with global history in Shanghai's regional curriculum. In the end the authorities judged the new approach to be too 'anti-ideological', and textbook authors returned to a more traditional approach in the 2007 history book edition (Vickers and Yang 2013/2014).

In terms of using the Anti-Japanese War to propagate patriotism, history textbooks form only a piece of the puzzle. Rose studied senior high history textbooks from four publishers and found that the amount of content dedicated to the Anti-Japanese War has declined in all textbook editions over the years. This is because the 2002 Teaching Outline reduced the hours allocated to history overall, and the 2003 high school history curriculum standards further reduced the coverage of the Anti-Japanese War in textbooks. While details of the war have been reduced, the effect of the remaining information is 'potentially greater', according to Rose (2013, 144). Furthermore, things written about Japan should be understood in the context of what is left out of Chinese history. The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution get very little coverage in the Shanghai textbooks (Vickers and Yang 2013/2014, 37).

To situate the handling of the Anti-Japanese War and 'hundred years of national humiliation' into the broader context, it is useful to have a brief look at the content of compulsory history education from the primary school stage to the university level.[1] In China's 9-year compulsory education history is divided into six areas: ancient, modern, and contemporary Chinese history on the one hand, and ancient, modern, and contemporary world history on the other hand. History teaching starts in junior middle school, or in seventh grade. It had two lessons per week from grade seven to grade nine, according to the 1992 class structure (Chinese Ministry of Education 1992). This allocation has remained the same in the 2022 class structure (Chinese Ministry of Education 2022).

The three broader sections on Chinese history are divided into a total of 23 subsections. The first theme, China's ancient history, is defined to begin when humans appeared to the Chinese territory and to end in 1840. It has the following nine subsections: the origin of Chinese civilization; national evolution and societal transformations; construction of a unified country; political divisions and merging of ethnic groups; prosperous and blossoming society; economic sectors and relations between ethnic groups; consolidation of a unified multi-ethnic country and societal crises; science and technology; and about civilization and culture. The second larger theme is China's modern history (1840-1949), which is divided into seven subsections: big powers' aggression and China's resistance; the start of modernisation; the rise of new democratic revolution; the Anti-Japanese War; victory of the liberation war against Kuomintang; the economy and societal life; and science, technology and ideological culture. The third theme looks at China's contemporary history (from

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1949 onwards), which is divided into seven subsections: establishment and consolidation of the People's Republic of China; exploring the road to socialism; building socialism with Chinese characteristics; ethnic groups and national unity; building national defence and achievements in foreign relations; science, education and culture; and societal life. (Chinese Ministry of Education 2011).

On the high school level, Modern and Contemporary Chinese History became compulsory effectively from 1992 onwards. Between 1992 and 1996, these classes were allocated two hours per week. In 1996, this weekly allocation was raised to three per week. (Rose 2013, 131). In April 2003, the Ministry of Education issued new (trial) history curriculum standards and a class structure for ordinary high schools, which listed three history courses as compulsory, each of which included 36 hours of classes (Chinese Ministry of Education 2003b). After the 2003 curriculum standards were implemented, teaching content was no longer chronologically arranged; rather, a new topic-based format was adopted (Rose 2013, 113). The first compulsory class, History 1 covers nine topics related to politics: ancient Chinese political systems; Great Power invasions and the Chinese people's struggles of resistance (including the European invasion of China and the Anti-Japanese War); modern China's democratic revolution; contemporary Chinese politics and national unification; the foreign relations of contemporary China; ancient Greek and Roman political systems; the establishment and development of the Western capitalist system; from scientific socialist principles to the establishment of a socialist system; and the structure of present day world politics and the trend of multi-polarity. The second compulsory class, History II, includes eight topics concentrating on economic issues from ancient China to the present day, and finally the third course, History III, lists eight topics focusing on science and technology (Chinese Ministry of Education 2003a).

Also university level has compulsory history classes for all majors. In the 1990s, there were two ideological courses focusing on Marxism theories and moral education. In 2005, the curriculum structure was changed to include four separate ideological courses: Marxism theories; Maoism, Deng's theories and the Three Representatives; the Outline of Modern Chinese History; and Moral cultivation and Law. (Zhang and Fagan 2016, 123). The teaching guide for the university level history course covers Chinese history from 1840 onwards. The content is taught in 32 hours and it has three sections. The first one starts from the Opium Wars and covers the period until the May 4th Movement in 1919.[2] This section deals with foreign aggression against China and China's response, awakening of China's national consciousness, the Taiping rebellion, the Wuxu reform in 1898 and the end of imperial China and the establishment of Republic of China. The second section covering years 1919 to 1949 is titled 'Thirty Years of Earth-shaking'. It discusses the New Culture Movement and the May 4th Movement, spread of Marxism in China, founding of the Communist Party of China, the civil war (in two separate sections), the Anti-Japanese War, the victory of the Anti-Japanese War and its significance, and finally explains how the people chose the People's Republic as their new form of governance. The final theme deals with the founding of New China and socialist modernization – that is, the years between 1949 and 2007. Its contents include the establishment of the basic socialist system in China, socialist industrialization and the development of the agricultural cooperative movement, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the period of Reform, Opening Up and Modernization, and opening up broader development prospects for socialism with Chinese characteristics. (Writing team of the Higher Education Press 2009).

In sum, while middle and high school teaching include plenty of content on China's history from 1840 onwards, teaching standards also contain multiple sections on ancient Chinese and world history. On the high school level, two thirds of the teaching content focus on economic issues and scientific developments and only the first compulsory course deals with political content.

In addition to history books, patriotic education includes visits to museums and monuments as well as military training (军训) (Genevaz 2019; Müller 2018; Naftali 2020). China is covered by a net of 'model patriotic education bases' consisting of memorials and museums (Müller 2018). Military training is organized as a week-long course first in the summer prior to the entry into middle school

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and later into high school (Naftali 2020). Courses organized for students entering universities last for two weeks and focus on formation drills but also include collective singing and military theory (Genevaz 2019). Patriotic education is not limited to school environment as prime-time television should offer 'patriotic' programs according to state rules. Such programs tend to concentrate on the Second Sino-Japanese War or revolutionary history (Müller 2018, 344).

Thirty years after its launch, the themes of the patriotic education campaign still very much influence Chinese education reforms. In November 2019, the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council published a new guideline for patriotic education. It mentions that both the Party Central Committee and Xi Jinping attach great importance to patriotism education. As the earlier guidelines, the 2019 guideline concentrates on enhancing students' patriotism, as they are the main target group of patriotic education. In addition to traditional classroom teaching, the 2019 guideline relies on online materials and social media platforms such as *Weibo* and *WeChat* and new methods such as adding patriotic content to video games. It also identifies a need to strengthen national defence education (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China 2019).

Representations of history among elite university students

Younger people have received patriotic education most of their lives and are sometimes described as the 'generation of patriotic education' with the inclination that this generation is more nationalistic than some previous generations (Wang 2008, 800). Studies conducted in China have shown that the media environment influences educated respondents' views even when they recognise that the media is biased in its reporting (Sinkkonen and Elovainio 2020). One study found that university students from the mainland supported the official stance in issues related to national security and were more nationalistic in security matters than their peers who received their education in Macao or Hong Kong (Yang 2022). On the other hand, there is plenty of research emphasizing that youth are not passive recipients of schooling (Fairbrother 2008; Porat 2004). Thus, it is useful to study empirically what kind of representations of history dominate among students.

Earlier empirical research analyzing social representations of history has found that such representations tend to focus on conflicts (Liu 1999; Liu et al. 2005). Liu found that when asking respondents from Hong Kong, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand to list important events in world history, the representations tended to focus on the recent rather than distant past and on conflicts, especially on the two world wars (Liu 1999). Techio et al. discovered that asking respondents to list important events using an open-ended response format resulted in more war-related events, whereas pregiven list of options including scientific breakthroughs diversified the views on what should be considered important (Techio et al. 2010).

Social representations of history are linked to attitudes such as willingness to fight for one's country. Paez et al. discovered that the more positive evaluation of the Second World War was reported, the more willing respondents were to fight for their country in future wars. Recalling wars in general was unrelated to willingness to fight. The study included student samples from 22 countries including China (Paez et al. 2009).

Sample

To find out what kind of social representations of history prevail among Chinese elite university students, we used an open-ended question in which the students were asked to name one to five events or periods that first came to their mind when they thought of Chinese history. Similar open-ended questions have been used in other surveys concentrating on social representations of history (Liu 1999; Liu et al. 2005). Although the open-ended format is time-consuming to handle and report, it allows respondents to answer freely in comparison to structured survey questions, which might not include the answers respondents might be looking for.

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This question was part of a longer survey, which otherwise included questions related to national identity and China's foreign relations. It was collected first between April and June 2007 at Renmin University of China, Peking University and Tsinghua University (N=1346). A second dataset was collected at Shanghai Jiaotong University, Fudan University, Nanjing University and Zhejiang University in November and December 2011, and at Renmin University of China, Peking University, and Tsinghua University in March 2012 (N = 771). Response rates were 95% in 2007 and 93% in 2011–2012. Except for Renmin University of China, these universities belong to the C9 league (九校联盟) of Chinese top universities. Owing to the political sensitivity of the research topic, this survey was conducted as a convenience sample in the university lecture halls used for studying when no teaching is going on.[3] The lecture halls were selected based on their location on campus to get as representative sample of students as possible. Participants did not receive any financial compensation for their participation. No faculty members were present during sampling giving respondents a degree of privacy in answering the questionnaire and ensured their anonymity. More detailed sample characteristics can be found from the appendix (Supplementary material).

In 2007, 11 interviews were also conducted with students studying in the same universities in which the questionnaires were collected. All interviews were conducted in Chinese in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement. Interview records were later transcribed by a native Chinese speaker. We inquired about students' experiences of patriotic education, with specific questions on the content and amount of history education they had received, their experiences in compulsory military training camps, how they felt about compulsory ideological classes and China's national traumas.

Results

Answers to the survey question on historical events were coded under categories such as 'the Ming dynasty' and 'the Anti-Japanese War 1931–1945'. In case an event was too specific or not mentioned by more than five students, they were left out of coding. In total we had 20 categories of historical periods.[4] In the 2007 sample (N=1346) over 99 percent of those students who otherwise filled in the questionnaire responded to this question. The 2011–2012 (N=771) questionnaire was considerably longer and contained more complex issues, which is probably why the response rate for this unstructured question dropped to 72 percent of those who responded to other questions. As the periods were written by hand, a native Chinese speaker read and coded the events.

In the 2007 data, the clearly most mentioned category was the Tang dynasty, which was mentioned 672 times. Events related to the Anti-Japanese War were second most mentioned, with 514 mentions. 69 of the students even mentioned several events that belonged to this category. Other often-mentioned categories were the Qing dynasty and the Opium wars (mentioned 251 times), the period before the Qin dynasty (242), the Qin dynasty (233), the Han dynasty (226) and the Cultural Revolution (223). On the other hand, events such as the Tiananmen incident and joining the World Trade Organization were mentioned only a few times.

In 2011–2012 the most mentioned period was the Anti-Japanese War, which was mentioned 260 times. Second most mentioned category was the Qing dynasty especially with regards to violent events and foreign aggression (mentioned 256 times). In the latter survey, the Tang dynasty, which was the most often mentioned period in 2007, was the third most mentioned category in 2011-2012 with 155 mentions. The following most often mentioned options were the Cultural Revolution (131), the Republic of China (123) and the Period of Reform and Opening Up (111).

Specificity of responses varied greatly. Respondents could write, for example, the Wuxu reform (戊戌变法), which was a reform program of the late Qing empire that took place in 1898. 'Modern history' (近代史) was a quite often used formulation, which is too broad to be coded for our purposes. 'The splendid history of Chinese civilization' and 'history of humiliation' were also too broad to be coded. A few examples of events mentioned less than five times and thus left out of coding include Nixon's visit to China, establishing diplomatic relations with the US, China's

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conflicts with India and Vietnam, return of Hong Kong and Macao, becoming a permanent member of the UN and becoming the second biggest economy in the world. A few students mentioned scientific development, namely the four great inventions (四大发明) and the societal policy of family planning (计划生育). Some also included longer explanations for their choices.

In the interviews conducted in June 2007, we asked about which periods or events were emphasized the most in history education: the most common answer was that teachers followed the official curriculum very carefully and teachers' personalities and teaching styles influenced a great deal how interesting the content felt. According to a 21-year-old female history major from Peking University (Interviewed by author, June 20, Beijing), unstable periods such as the Wei-Jin period and glorious periods like the Tang dynasty and the Song dynasty were both emphasised. A 20-year-old male marketing student from Renmin University of China also found that prosperous periods such as the Han, the Tang and the Ming dynasties were emphasised in compulsory history teaching (Interviewed by author, June 24. Beijing). A 27-year-old male economics student from Tsinghua University pointed out that the media pays attention to the Han and the Tang dynasties (Interviewed by author, June 24. Beijing).

The role of history teaching more broadly was seen as important for forming national identity, patriotic feelings and, as one interviewee noted, for building legitimacy for the Communist Party:

> *History is really important. The first reason is that the authority and legitimacy of the Party is to a great degree based on history. If there wouldn't be history classes or people would stop studying history, they would probably be unsatisfied with the problems of today's society. History education tells us how this country has been founded and constructed by the communists and that without them, we would be in trouble.* (Student of international relations at Renmin University of China. 2007. Female, age: 22. Interviewed by author, June 24. Beijing)

Some respondents raised very sharp criticism on the ways in which patriotic education is executed, as exemplified by the comments of a law student.

> *I think that some aspects of China's education are incorrect; and that some of the contents of what the government is teaching us is wrong. They taught a lot about Japan. I dislike Japan, but I feel that saying that you hate the Japanese or Japan does not mean that you are a patriot. The government is using us, that is not right, we should have our own thoughts. --- I personally think in this aspect China is very wrong.* (Student of law at Renmin University of China. 2007. Male, age: 26. Interviewed by author, June 17. Beijing)

At the same time, all interviewees felt that patriotism is something that can and should be taught at school. There was more divergence in terms of how this teaching should best be organized and what its content should be. Nobody felt that the compulsory political classes were an effective way of propagating the Party ideology. Experiences of compulsory military training camps varied. While some felt that they were waste of time, others found it useful to learn discipline and thinking about the collective instead of oneself. Some even felt that the camp experiences enhanced their feelings of patriotism.

Our semi-structured interviews included also questions about the hundred years of national humiliation. When discussing this topic, multiple interviewees mentioned China's domestic conditions as part of the reason for why external powers were able to attack China. A 20-year-old female majoring in chemical engineering at Tsinghua University noted that the period of Qing dynasty and the Republic of China were both periods of inner rottenness and corruption (Interviewed by author, June 16. Beijing). Interestingly, when asking about China's national traumas, only a few respondents mentioned the era of national humiliation. Others came up with more eclectic responses:

> *From ancient times until today the Chinese people have been oppressed, without freedom or democracy. This kind of autocratic tradition is China's biggest trauma. For example, when it*

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comes to corruption, from ancient times until today the main thing has been how things look from the outside, not how they really are. (Student of CCP history at Renmin University of China, 2007. Female, age: 21. Interviewed by author, June 24. Beijing)

The biggest trauma is that our country's system of thinking isn't suitable for today's society. Our education system doesn't emphasize bringing forth new ideas but memorizing ancient things. (At the moment) we don't have the tradition of bringing forth new ideas or questioning the authorities' way of thinking. --- I believe it cannot have been like this in the past, at least not all the time, otherwise China couldn't have become that strong. Perhaps it was because of Zhu Xi's and Confucianism's influence that this oppressive way of thinking was adopted during the Qing dynasty. (Student of economics at Tsinghua University, male, 27-year-old. Interviewed by author, June 24. Beijing)

To sum up, different forms of patriotic or ideological education were viewed differently in the interviews: teaching patriotism was regarded as necessary, but nobody wanted to attend the compulsory ideological courses at the university level, nor felt that they managed to convey the intended message. Some students enjoyed the military camps, for instance, and many noted that the teachers had a great deal of influence on how interesting the compulsory teaching content felt.

A couple of students were very vocal in raising their disagreement on the ways in which patriotic education has been executed. The view that people should have their own ideas about history and China rather than having to adopt the government promoted narrative was visible in multiple answers on different topics ranging from the use of the Anti-Japanese War in history education to legitimize the Party and its version of patriotism, to China's national traumas. Students clearly recognized that the Communist Party has designed the compulsory history education on all levels in such a way that the goal is not only to teach historical facts but to also legitimize the Party and its current position.

Still, it is important to note that acknowledging what the CCP is trying to achieve does not necessarily negate all the effects of patriotic education. This is partly because it takes extra effort for the students to study on their own time about issues that are left out of their history education or only handled cursorily. Few students have the time and energy to do that in the rather stressful university system. Consequently, the issues that are emphasized gain prevalence in students' consciousness even though they would disagree about some of the teaching methods or conclusions promoted in the compulsory classes.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed social representations of history in China combining the top-down perspective of state education policies and other forms of curating the Chinese historical narratives to the bottom-up perspective formed through analyzing two student surveys and 11 student interviews. In part the results have shown that we should not just assume that what the state propagates is what can also be found at the bottom-up level.

Based on the two surveys, representations of history seem to be divided into narratives of glory and humiliation, good and bad. The positive-negative dichotomy fits well with Volkan's research on chosen glories and chosen traumas, and the large proportion of negative events reported is in line with earlier research on social representations of history. In the negative side the Anti-Japanese War is strongly present in students' historical consciousness, but also the Tang dynasty, during which Chinese culture and trade bloomed and which is thus regarded mostly as a positive period, was often mentioned.

The patriotic education campaign has emphasized anti-Japanese content, and it is likely that it has also contributed to the prevalence of Sino-Japanese wars in students' representations of history. With the datasets used in this research it is however impossible to evaluate what the impact of

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patriotic education might be more precisely, as the student samples only included students from mainland China. Furthermore, as mentioned above, social representations of history in other countries as well include most often events that are considered negative (Liu 1999; Liu et al. 2005). In other words, mentioning negative or traumatic content cannot as such be taken as a sign of effective top-down propaganda in China. Still, the results have implications for Sino-Japanese relations: reconciliations efforts remain hard when the Chinese side is very aware of past wrong-doings of the Japanese.

While it was to be expected that the Anti-Japanese War would be mentioned often, the prevalence of the Tang dynasty and the Cultural Revolution in both samples was more surprising. In the interviews some students felt that glorious periods such as the Tang dynasty were emphasized in history teaching, and the history curriculum standards for middle and high school levels offer some backing for this. On the middle school level, the Sui and the Tang dynasties are mentioned as one of the seven items describing important teaching content in the section dealing with ancient Chinese history (Chinese Ministry of Education 2011). History curriculum standards for high schools cover the Tang dynasty period in all the three compulsory courses, although there are fewer details on the required content than in the standards for compulsory education (Chinese Ministry of Education 2003a). The fact that the Tang dynasty was the most mentioned period in the 2007 survey and dropped as the third most mentioned in the latter survey may be linked with the positive atmosphere in China before the 2008 Olympics during which media content tended to highlight China's past greatness. Yet, with two sets of surveys, one should not make too far-reaching conclusions.

The fact that the Cultural Revolution that gets less space in political speeches and textbooks was mentioned hundreds of times in both surveys says something about the relationship between top-down and bottom-up levels: there is also agency at the societal level and paths to social representations of history outside the channels of state propaganda. The Cultural Revolution was the seventh most mentioned category in 2007 and the fourth most mentioned in 2011-2012. It is not absent in compulsory history teaching, but covered rather briefly on all educational levels. Teaching standards for compulsory education state that students should 'understand the serious harm of the Cultural Revolution and the main lessons that can be drawn from it' without specifying what these lessons are (Chinese Ministry of Education 2011). On the high school level, the learning goal is to be able to analyse the Cultural Revolution (Chinese Ministry of Education 2003a). The compulsory university level module mentions the Cultural Revolution as part of the course content but does not specify any related learning goals (Writing team of the Higher Education Press 2009). In addition to the prevalence of the Cultural Revolution in the open-ended survey question, the interviews provided clear evidence of students' agency in trying to form their own understanding of Chinese history and not bluntly taking what the education policies aim at promoting to them.

When it comes to time perspective, Chinese respondents have a much longer perspective to China's history in comparison to international surveys cited above. While the Tang dynasty was among the top three most mentioned categories in both surveys, events dating before the Tang period got a fair amount of mentions as well, especially in the first survey. In the contemporary Chinese society distant past is kept alive through multiple forms including historical TV dramas, and official rhetoric from national constitution to political speeches often mentions China's long history of 5000 years. It would be interesting to compare the Chinese case with other countries with ancient roots to see if ancient historical events are part of social representations of history elsewhere. Would for example the Egyptians mention events dating back to the pharaohs when asked about what comes to their mind when they think of the history of Egypt?

The question of what is left out or forgotten from national master narratives begs further research. In contrast to the Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward got very few mentions. Events of the Cultural Revolution relate to student life and greatly affected the lives of young people at the time. Perhaps these events come mentally closer to later student generations than the Great

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Leap Forward and the resulting famine, which affected most severely people in the countryside while also limiting food supplies in the whole country. In any case, it is interesting that events leading to a death toll double in size in comparison to the Second Sino-Japanese War are not consciously considered to be significant. According to estimates, a minimum of 45 million Chinese died because of the Great Leap Forward, but the reality could be worse as some historians speculate that the total tally could be as high as 50 to 60 million excess deaths (Dikotter 2010, 333). It could be that the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution has come to symbolize societal imbalance more generally and might thus have been included in the prevalent social representations of history even when it gets little space in history textbooks. Moreover, there is of course a historical connection between the two periods, as Mao started the Cultural Revolution partly to purge his opponents who criticized the Great Leap Forward (Dikotter 2010, 335–337). A comparative project on domestic turmoil such as civil wars and their remembrance could perhaps contextualize the Chinese case of remembering/forgetting the Great Leap Forward and its victims. Opening of relevant archives would also be essential for creating a better understanding of the events.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at http://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.80.

Financial support. Koneen Säätiö (Kone Foundation), Grant Number: 088783.

Disclosure. None.

Notes

1 Here the cited documents have been chosen to match the times surveyed students were attending school. This was not always exactly possible due to document availability, but the closest available option was chosen.
2 As the titles of this course syllabus are often quite figurative and the total number of subtitles too numerous to be listed here, I described the content of the subsections rather than translating all the titles as most of them would be hard to understand to a non-Chinese reader even when translated.
3 Almost all Chinese university students live in the campus area in dormitories, where four to eight people generally share a room. This makes it hard to study in the dormitory, so most students study in the empty lecture halls between lectures.
4 Historical events and periods were coded into the following categories: Pre Qin (up to 221 BC), Qin dynasty (221-206 BC), Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), Three Kingdoms (220-280 AD), Sui dynasty (581-618 AD), Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), Song dynasty (960-1279 AD), Yuan dynasty (1279-1368 AD), Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD), Qing dynasty 1 (positive issues) (1644-1911AD), Qing dynasty 2 (negative issues), Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860), Republic of China (1912-1949), Anti-Japanese War (1931-1945), Civil War (1927-1950), Foundation of the People's Republic of China (1949), Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Period of Reform and Opening Up (1978-), Tiananmen Incident (1989), and joining the WTO (2001).

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Interviews

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20-year-old female economics student from Renmin University of China, interviewed by author June 16, 2007, Beijing.
20-year-old male journalism student from Renmin University of China, interviewed by author, June 17, 2007, Beijing.
20-year-old international relations student from Renmin University of China, interviewed by author, June 18, 2007, Beijing.
26-year-old male law student from Renmin University of China. 2007, interviewed by author, June 17, 2007, Beijing.
21-year-old female history student from Peking University, interviewed by author, June 20, 2007, Beijing.
21-year-old female economics student from Renmin University of China, interviewed by author, June 20, 2007, Beijing.
20-year-old male marketing student from Renmin University of China, interviewed by author, June 24, 2007, Beijing.
27-year-old male economics student from Tsinghua University, interviewed by author, June 24, 2007, Beijing.
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Cite this article: Sinkkonen, Elina. 2025. "Chosen Glory and Chosen Trauma with Chinese Characteristics: Social Representations of History in an Authoritarian Context". *Nationalities Papers*: 1–17, doi:10.1017/nps.2024.80

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.80 Published online by Cambridge University Press