

*China's Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism*, by Rana Mitter. Harvard University Press, 2020 (ISBN 9780674984264).

Noam Chomsky once stated, “Nationalism has a way of oppressing others.” This is particularly true for hypernationalism and revanchism, which often lead to the oppression of others. In fact, the word *revanchism* is derived from the French word *revanche*, meaning revenge. China’s nationalism has been influenced by its history of being humiliated and exploited by foreign powers, particularly Japan and other imperialist nations. Revanchism is particularly acute when it relates to lost territories, which for China includes those on the Indian subcontinent and in the South China Sea.

Rana Mitter, inspired by Studs Terkel’s book *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II* (1984), has written *China's Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism*. The book highlights how China’s interpretation of its World War II struggles is shaping the course of international and national affairs today. During the Cold War, China defined itself as a revolutionary, anti-imperialist, and communist state, shaping its identity in accordance with the structure of the international system. However, in the twenty-first century, China is increasingly defining itself based on economic power and a desire to challenge the existing unipolar international order. Beijing presents itself as a responsible global actor, promoting new international norms and playing an active role in multilateral institutions. China often highlights its struggles and setbacks, portraying itself as a victim of colonialism and war, to foster a sense of national solidarity among its citizens.

The first chapter of the book delves into the challenges faced by China during the Cold War era (1937–1978) and Beijing’s efforts to establish China as a sovereign nation, despite appearing weak. In the aftermath of World War II, the country faced the daunting task of rebuilding and stabilizing its economy. The Cold War proved to be one of the most challenging periods in China’s history, marked by conflicts between the Nationalists and Communists, lack of recognition by major powers, including the United States, the passing of key leaders, such as Mao, conflicts with Japan, the inability to unify Taiwan with the mainland, redefining the country’s ideology, and a rift with the Soviet Union. These events, however, provided China with an opportunity to revise and rewrite its history, setting the stage for a new era of development and growth.

The next three chapters examine the prominent writers and major scholarly works that have contributed to shaping China’s account of the “war of resistance.” However, the Tiananmen Square massacre caused a shift in government policies,

leading to the introduction of patriotic education to ensure that people's sentiments were supportive of the government. Museums were renovated and revived to reflect China's struggle and efforts during the war of resistance, establishing itself as a strong nation. The National Palace Museum became a means of promoting a new sense of citizenship rather than subjecthood. In Beijing, Nanjing, and Shenyang, war museums attempted to propagate a novel historiography of the war, reflecting the state's interests since the 1980s. The media and cinema were also utilized to spread similar propaganda. When Xi Jinping became the leader, his vision for China to regain its lost glory instilled a new authoritarian chill into China's public sphere. News media, cinema, movies, biographies, and documentaries are now being used to exercise techno-authoritarianism by shaping the experiences of World War II and portraying China as a significant contributor to the antifascist struggle.

Chapter 5 of the book delves into the fascinating stories and narratives of nationalism at the local and international level, focusing on Chongqing—the provisional wartime capital of China from 1937 to 1946. During this time, Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek led the war effort while staying in exile. The author examines the city's history and looks for engaging and thought-provoking stories at the local level. In chapter 6, the book compares China's attitudes before and after its economic boom. In the late twentieth century, China followed international norms and laws to reduce its isolationism and gain support from other major powers. However, since the 2000s, Beijing has shifted its stance and is now more interested in taking a leadership role at the regional and global levels. In an attempt to gain recognition for its sacrifices, China has emphasized its territorial conflicts in the East and South China Sea and seeks to interpret history in its own way.

Mitter presents a nuanced account of the Cold War that expands beyond the traditional Eurocentric view of bloc politics, emphasizing the struggles of recently independent states attempting to find their place in the international system. However, instead of seeking validation from a single country, China diversified its relations due to continuous rejection, ignorance, and nonrecognition by major powers. Rather than depicting China as a former colony, the book portrays it as a unique entity, like many other newly independent countries, attempting to rebuild itself without becoming a pawn in the power struggle between blocs. Mitter carefully illustrates how China utilized its Cold War history to evoke nationalist sentiments among its citizens.

This book provides a comprehensive analysis of China's historical discourse after World War II. Although the use of history to glorify the past is not unique, the author offers a valuable insight into how China has utilized this technique to

arouse nationalism. However, the book's tone may come across as slightly critical toward China, emphasizing its efforts to safeguard its unity. While the book effectively achieves its objective, it is primarily geared toward an academic audience and may be too detailed for non-academic readers.

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