

Remembering forgotten heroes and the idealisation of true love: Veteran memorial activism in contemporary China

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Jacqueline Zhenru Lin 

University of Cambridge, UK

Abstract

Recent research on collective memory and war commemoration highlights the ‘conspicuous silence’ of war veterans in Chinese history. Studies of the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945) typically reflect either a state-centred approach, which emphasises the official history constructed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), or the alternative narratives constructed by intellectual elites in post-socialist China. In response to these top-down narratives, this essay focuses instead on a historical redress movement led by ex-servicemen of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The former PLA members, the participant volunteers of this movement, devote themselves into seeking and supporting a group of forgotten Kuomintang (KMT) veterans who fought against the Japanese invaders in the Second World War but now struggle with impoverished living conditions. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork from 2013 to 2015, I will show how the daily interactions between these two groups of veterans embody a more private and internalised sense of commemorative yearning for a lost past, highlighting in the process the value of ethnographic research in breaking through the wall of silence constructed by hegemonic histories around veteran communities and their role in making war history.

Keywords

China, embodied nostalgia, memorialisation, nostalgia, veteran

Introduction

This article examines the social practice of war commemoration by focussing on a historical redress movement in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) that supports and commemorates a group of voiceless veterans who, despite being on the winning side in their country’s War of Resistance Against Japan (1937–1945), have been stigmatised by their wartime association with the ruling Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) former political and military rivals, the Nationalists (KMT). By doing so, it casts new light on the role that non-elite actors play in recovering and remembering the past through community-based volunteering. In particular, my analysis focuses

Corresponding author:

Jacqueline Zhenru Lin, St John’s College, University of Cambridge, Cambridgeshire CB2 1TP, UK.

Email: ZL363@cam.ac.uk

on ex-servicemen of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) who, in recent years, have volunteered in order to aid their forgotten compatriots of the KMT forces who fought for China in the conflict better known outside the PRC as the Second World War.

After fighting with the Allies against Japan in 1945, Nationalist soldiers resumed their decades-long battle with the armies of the CCP, embarking on a conflict known today as the Chinese Civil War (1946–1949).¹ Following the victory of the CCP in 1949, the KMT fled to Taiwan. This retreat from the Chinese mainland determined the fate of many KMT veterans who failed to make the journey across the Taiwan Strait and who subsequently were labelled as political enemies of the newly formed socialist state governed by their erstwhile enemy. As such, the historical contribution of these national heroes was erased for decades from official history, as written by the ruling CCP.

Categorised as 'counter-revolutionaries' (*fangemin fenzi*) in CCP parlance, the majority of KMT veterans and their family members suffered political stigmatisation, social discrimination and as a consequence, severe economic difficulty after 1949. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the KMT were portrayed as 'enemies of the people' and consequently put in jail, humiliated in public and often tortured by supporters of the revolution. Although, in the last few decades, the CCP has gradually begun to recognise through state propaganda the contribution of the previous KMT government on the war against Japan, it still refuses to provide social welfare and what might be considered an honourable rehabilitation to individual KMT veterans and their families. It is thus hardly surprising that, in what is a ground-breaking comparative study, Diamant (2010, 2011; Diamant and Kevin, 2015) shows us that Chinese veterans have always been a voiceless group in the realm of war commemoration and have, at the same time, also gone unrecognised by society. This is in contrast to the image of their Allied counterparts as the winners of the Second World War, or even the Axis powers as the conflict's losers.

To right these historical wrongs, a historical redress movement aiming to re-evaluate the role of the KMT during the war was initiated online in the 1990s by a group of people from the nation's capital, Beijing. Since the 2000s and following conciliatory shifts in the CCP's historical narrative of the war, cultural elites and wealthy entrepreneurs have established NGOs involved in redress activities, creating a nationwide charity programme that serves KMT veterans who are in most need. In the 2010s, the leaders of these NGOs worked with politicians in Hong Kong to make a proposal at the National Congress Conference to appeal for justice for KMT veterans (Charity Alliance, 2016). While a growing amount of work has centred around how cultural elites and NGOs challenge the state's 'memory regime' (Yang, 2005), there is comparatively less attention paid to localised and personal memories taking place on the ground. These include the creation of memorial landscapes spearheaded by non-elites, commemorative activities initiated within local communities and how actors involved in these areas may engage in memory-making in more effective ways. In turn, the actors exercise their own agency in reconstructing the past. This study will concentrate on these almost invisible local actors, who have consistently contributed to the redress phenomenon by using their experience to fill a gap in existing literature.

There are currently three dominant paradigms that conceptualise memory-making in China. The most influential one is the top-down, state-centred approach that focuses on how the CCP manipulates historical narratives for its own gain (Coble, 2007; Denton, 2014; Mitter, 2017; Mitter and Aaron, 2011; Waldron, 1996; Yang, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2010). By contrast, the social agency approach gives voice to cultural elites and emphasises the existence of an 'alternative memory' (Davies, 2005; Denton, 2019; He, 2007; Lin, 2016; Mitter, 2003, 2007; Pickowicz, 1994; Reilly, 2011). Only a few contemporary scholars focus on online nationalism and the construction of Chinese collective memory in cyberspace (Han, 2015; Gustafsson, 2019; Le Han, 2016; Wang, 2019; Weatherley and Zhang, 2017; Zhang and Weatherley, 2013), an approach which I will call

the ‘keyboard warrior approach’. Those studies generally frame the online participants as nationalist zealots who espouse anti-Japanese sentiment.

These three approaches have several limitations, however, and if employed here would fail to capture the dynamics of the redress phenomenon. Firstly, the current scholarship neglects bottom-up memorialisation efforts that are led by non-elite actors in local communities. It assumes that ordinary people in China are ‘brainwashed’ masses who have been subject to manipulated historical accounts through state propaganda and alternative memories constructed by cultural elites. Secondly, scholars typically focus on formal forms of representation, such as political rituals, museums, films and literature. This intellectual bias decontextualises acts and sites of war commemoration as it presents them only as static ‘texts’, neglecting the dynamic dimensions of memory-making practices. Thirdly, although the keyboard warrior approach acknowledges the vitality of grassroots communities, the insight it provides into memory activism is limited to online content disseminated through social media. Offline activity, including the cooperation that takes place among social actors, is neglected.

In looking to overcome these pitfalls, this article casts new light on war commemoration in contemporary China by providing a detailed ethnography on an invisible group of memory activists involved in a bottom-up redress movement. Drawing upon my extensive fieldwork in activist communities, my analysis focuses on how meanings of war are constructed in the course of daily life. In particular, it focuses on the social relationships between two groups of veterans who used to belong to opposing political groups. My analytical lens investigates the intersection of veteran activism and war legacy in community-based memorialisation practices, highlighting the non-elite actors’ voices in the reconstruction of the past. Moving beyond the dichotomy of the hegemonic state and the general populace, common to studies of memory activism, this study shows how the memory activists strategically use counter-memories *and* official war narratives, while also reinstating the erased past. Methodologically, this study further develops the keyboard warrior approach by connecting the knowledge production processes that take place in cyberspace to the social organisation among actors in local communities.

As well as enhancing our understanding of memorial practices in China, these new insights also contribute to the burgeoning literature that resists the Eurocentric conceptualisation of war commemoration (Frost et al., 2019). To deprovincialise the examination of Second World War afterlives in a non-western context, this study asserts the uniqueness of national and regional memory trajectories. In doing so, I respond to what Diamant (2010, 2011) calls the ‘conspicuous silence’ of the veteran communities in Chinese history. In his in-depth comparative studies on the lives of ex-servicemen, he argues that the mistreatment of PRC veterans cannot be explained away by focusing solely on the ‘authoritarian regime’, ‘Asian issues’ or ‘Chinese culture’. By integrating crucial ‘Chinese characteristics’ into this study of war commemoration, this article investigates the new forms and practices of remembrance, capturing some of the diversity and complexity of the memory boom as it has evolved in the East Asian context.

This article begins, then, by introducing the history of the War of Resistance against Japan in China and the shifting paradigms of its commemoration. Following that, the second core section presents a detailed analysis of the PLA veterans’ devotion to the veneration of KMT war heroes, centred on how they re-experience the glorious past through their ‘brother-in-arms’ volunteering network, before a third section shows how they have re-defined romantic love through a particular framing of the veterans’ marital lives. Through their conceptualisation of the veterans as national heroes, the activists’ devotion to their older compatriots facilitates nostalgic imaginings that are motivated by the search for an individual suffering obscured by state-centred historical accounts of the past.

My ethnographic fieldwork focussing on this redress movement began in December 2013, when I interned at an NGO which served as a sponsor and platform for volunteers helping KMT veterans

in Hunan province. Through witnessing the growth and development of their commemorative activities over the years that followed, I decided to join frontline volunteers in Hunan for a period of fieldwork between April and September 2015.

I engaged in a period of participant observation of the redress activist communities across seven cities, four counties and five villages, focussing on their interactions with KMT veterans, their own understandings of commemoration and how their own life-histories informed their activities. To contextualise their personal engagement with the reconstruction of the PRC's collective memory, I conducted in-depth interviews with 57 volunteers and 19 members of the volunteers' families – mainly with their spouses and children. My analysis also focusses on the cultural representations of KMT heroes and the war, promoted by the volunteers within and outside their communities, as part of their attempts to educate a public who might not share the same depth of historical knowledge or curiosity. To provide a fuller picture of the volunteers' understanding of the war, I use content analysis of their online communications in chatrooms and on social media, as well as on their offline networking sites where volunteering activities were organised.

The war of resistance against Japan and the historical redress movement

For more than half a century, the War of Resistance against Japan, has been overshadowed by the CCP's revolutionary exploits and its founding of a 'new China' in 1949. In party-state discourse, the leading political power of 'old China' (People's Daily, 1949), the KMT, which was defeated by the CCP in the Chinese Civil War, was traditionally portrayed as the enemy of the people. As a result, those people who had connections to the KMT government were politically and socially stigmatised. Instead of enjoying glory as heroes who in 1945 brought victory to the nation in the war against Japan, both the fallen soldiers of the KMT and their comrades who survived the wars, existed for decades on the political margins of PRC society as 'counter-revolutionaries'.

However, in recent years, there have been social transformations since the 1980s when the economic reform started (Waldron, 1996). Forgotten KMT soldiers have been tentatively invited by the CCP to take the stage as part of a 'wave of [a] new remembering of the war' (Coble, 2007). This new wave presents the KMT veterans as examples of brave Chinese people who were prepared to sacrifice themselves for their motherland, a shift which is a direct result of changing international relations in East Asia and beyond.

Several scholars have observed the Chinese state's role in adjusting the paradigm of how the war is narrated, noting changes in portrayals of KMT military personnel in, for example, political rituals, museums and movies (Denton, 2014, 2019; Mitter, 2000, 2003; Yang, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2010). As Yang (2005) states, the Communist Party in China has struggled to sustain a 'memory regime' that determines which memories are acceptable and the narratives into which they fit.

In the case of the War, the Party's focus on commemoration (with the Japanese enemy in mind) has changed over the course of the past several decades. Before 1982, the war was downplayed in historical narratives, which caused the Chinese nation to develop a type of 'benevolent amnesia' in response to the Japanese invasion of China from 1937–1945. In the mid-1980s, the CCP government used the war commemoration against Japan as part of a patriotic campaign to enhance support for their party. What followed was a wave of anti-Japanese activism in the late 1990s. In the 2000s, the CCP foregrounded its legitimacy in building a unified Chinese nation, which included Taiwan. To that end, the CCP partly recognised the contribution of the KMT, the current major political party in Taiwan, in resisting foreign invaders during the war. This most recent development of the war commemoration has helped in the rewriting of a new history of the Chinese community, which fits the current agenda of the ruling CCP (Reilly, 2011; Yang, 2000, 2010).

While the ‘seeing like a state’ framework proposed by Scott (1998) dominates the field of memory studies, some scholars deploy the social-agent approach developed by Winter (1998, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2016) and Winter and Emmanuel (1999) to examine alternative memories which manifest in private museums, films, publications and other cultural representations. Those studies using the social-agent approach, frame such remembrance activities as ‘weapons’ of the elites who strategically attempt to challenge the CCP’s memory regimes. Denton’s (2014, 2019) study, for example, on the largest private museum in China shows how local elites endeavour to insert stories of the KMT veterans into the memorial landscape. Moving away from the state and non-state elites, a few studies deploy the third framework developed by the Popular Memory Group (1982), which aims to bring back the voices of individuals and their life-stories. In particular, it sheds light on online history activism organised by netizens on the Bulletin Board System, chatrooms and micro-blogs. By adopting Eurocentric frameworks popular in memory studies, discussed above, much existing research on China fails to acknowledge the regional and cultural-historical differences in memory-making processes. In response, this article integrates two overlooked variations in narrating the past in China as part of an East Asian mnemonic landscape or region.

The first regional variation explored in this study, focusses on China’s war-related memoryscape, or what Diamant (2011) terms the ‘conspicuous silence’ of individual veterans in the commemoration of militarised conflict. The oppression of the veterans’ voices contributes to the structural disadvantages they faced following their return from the battlefield. After demobilisation, the majority of KMT veterans, uneducated and impoverished, were forced to return to their native villages where forming associations amongst themselves was forbidden (Diamant, 2011). Unlike veterans from other countries who have received support by social elites, the KMT Chinese veterans, after being demobbed, failed to attain any semblance of a martial-based citizenship which would have provided them with political status, social recognition and economic support (Diamant, 2010, 2011; Diamant and Kevin, 2015). In other words, their military service and battlefield experience was erased from the historical record. Consequently, the most crucial task of the redress movement I joined was to search for those ‘vanished’ veterans who have been living in the countryside since the middle of the last century. The redress activists search for and collect information about ‘suspected heroes’, who are often now in their nineties, through social networks and at the local level. By recording oral histories and crosschecking the information given with that provided in historical archives, the identities of the ‘veterans of the War of Resistance’ can be ‘restored’ by the teams of redress activists.

The second regional variation concerns the Chinese Civil War, a conflict which occurred very soon after the War of Resistance against Japan. Following the end of the struggle with the Japanese, the KMT veterans who had fought against the foreign invader then participated in a final confrontation with a domestic enemy, the People’s Liberation Army. After their soldiers’ had sealed the CCP’s victory, the KMT veterans who had fought against them were stigmatised as the enemies of the new PRC regime and the Chinese people. As a result, in CCP propaganda, the historical narratives describing the War of Resistance against Japan have been ever-evolving, something which undermines the earlier consensus legitimising the Chinese Civil War (Diamant, 2011; Lary, 2010; Lary and Stephen, 2001; Van de Ven, 2003, 2018; Van de Ven et al., 2014). Unlike the framework of ‘total war’ that sees the whole nation mobilised as one in western contexts, in Chinese society contentious and competing narratives towards the war and its legacy have developed, leaving the KMT veterans in social limbo. To provide a holistic picture of the complexity of commemoration in China, we cannot simply focus on how people record the veterans’ experiences in battle. Instead, we need to extend our analysis to how people interpret the meanings of the war and its afterlives in retelling the veterans’ life histories for them.

Through acknowledging the above-mentioned variations shaping China's particular post-war mnemonic milieu, this article focusses on a redress movement that connects two groups of veterans who used to belong to opposing political and military sides. Foregrounding the creation of a shared soldier identity, it examines transgenerational memory transmission between KMT war veterans and the ex-servicemen from their former PLA enemy. As individual subjects of memory activism, the PLA veterans have connected their own suffering and difficulties to the stories, photos and other cultural representations of the war heroes to whom they provide long-term care. This process of linking their own life-histories to a reimagined past through their participation in the redress movement offers insight into the role that nostalgia plays in the remaking of memory. Through their interactions with war veterans, the volunteers connect the forgotten past of the veterans to the suffering they have endured in their own daily lives.

This re-imagining of the past differs from the nostalgic sentiments reflected in films, literature and other cultural representations manufactured by China's cultural industries (Dai and Chen, 1997; Yang, 2003, 2005). Serving as 'a weapon to not talk about the past (in a politically sensitive way) while talking about it' (Bryant, 2014: 155), the volunteers' yearning for a lost past stems from their hope to appeal for justice for the forgotten veterans. In other words, the redress movement moves beyond what Appadurai criticises as a mythical romanticisation of the past without 'lived experience or collective historical memory' (Appadurai, 1996: 72).

Instead, it is nostalgia that serves as a bridge between the past and the present in the course of their daily lives and in the interpersonal interactions between the KMT veterans and the redress activists. Through the caregiving programmes they undertake, the rural ex-servicemen of the PLA are able to come together with the KMT war veterans and share their pain. Together, they re-experience a glorious past as soldiers by performing military salutes and recording the KMT veterans' old war wounds. As they care for those they perceive as war heroes, the demobilised PLA members record stories about pre-1949 China and even frame the war veterans' marriages as exemplars of a true love that no longer exists.

The next section moves to detailing the life histories and lived experiences of the ex-PLA volunteers. To this end, I will focus on how redress activists interact with the KMT veterans, how they explain their devotion to the movement, and how the past and present intersect in the photographs taken of the veterans and their spouses by the PLA volunteers.

Embodied nostalgia: A quest for respect

Participants of historical-redress movements in contemporary China have usually been imagined as taking a stance that puts them at odds with the CCP (Judd, 1994; Pickowicz, 1994; Watson, 1994). However, the central role of serviceman from the People's Liberation Army, a body of course considered loyal to the Party-state, contradicts that simplistic understanding of historical redress movements as simply unsupportive of the political status quo. As mentioned above, participation in care programmes for KMT veterans offers the rural PLA ex-servicemen opportunities for personal expression and a chance to re-connect with the glory days of their military lives through nostalgic reminiscence. Notably, such opportunities were not available elsewhere in their post-service lives, either at work or at home, despite their contribution to the nation, where they too feel underappreciated by society.

This lack of recognition relates in the main to their socio-economic status. Among 57 volunteers I encountered in my fieldwork, 38 of them were rural-dwelling PLA members in their early 30s to late 40s who had served in the military. Most of them were from remote areas in the southwest part of Hunan province. In an attempt to achieve a degree of social mobility, they all joined the army before the age of 18 and served for more than 5 years. Twelve of these former soldiers were sent to

the border regions, in their words, 'to guard the motherland' (*baowei zuguo*). Their time in the military was typically described by them as the best period of their life. However, following their failure to be promoted within the military, they were discharged and returned to their hometowns. Only two-thirds of them were then assigned jobs as low-ranking officials in local government, drivers, or simply security positions in state-owned enterprises. Those who could not get assigned new occupations after leaving the armed forces were faced with numerous obstacles upon entering the job market due to their educational background and a general unwillingness to leave home again and become migrant workers.

These memory activists, who assist and venerate the forgotten heroes in their local communities, are not, then, like conventional volunteers who typically live in urban settings, are often middle-class, and undertake charity work as a form of leisure activity. Instead, what drives the PLA veterans to devote themselves to redress activities is their attachment to the military life they have seen disappear following demobilisation. This longing is rooted in the identity crisis brought about by the institutional shift that takes place in their work life, which I will call 'embodied nostalgia'.

My framework approaches nostalgia as an embodied experience that aims to allow one to re-experience and regain the ideal representation of oneself. As scholars in memory studies have observed, the experience of nostalgia offers an important lens with which to explore the entanglement of the past and the present through memory-making (Atia and Davies, 2010). Pioneering literature depicts this emotion as a yearning for a lost past featuring in the cultural production of elites and political conservatives in Eastern European post-socialist paradigms (Angé and David, 2014). Inspired by Boym's (1995, 2001, 2007) categorisation of 'good' and 'bad' nostalgia, there is extensive literature that identifies 'progressive' and 'conservative' discourses and practices associated with the socialist past (Legg, 2005; Cashman, 2006; Laurajane and Gary, 2017; Loveday, 2014). Based on 'texts' created in various mediums and the class status of their producers, scholars in Chinese studies simplistically frame the yearning for socialism as a distortion of history manifested in commodities and visual representations (Dai and Chen, 1997; Davies, 2005; Lu, 2002; Shen, 2016; Yang, 2003; Zhu, 2017). In foregrounding the class status of actors experiencing nostalgia, together these studies highlight that the re-imagining of the past through the rose-tinted sunglasses of reminiscence is mainly driven by consumerism and the urban middle-classes (Sun, 2017).

Deploying an actor-centred approach, my analysis casts light on the identity-based nostalgia that motivates volunteering and how the past is remembered. Departing from the dichotomy between good and bad nostalgia, my anthropological approach closely examines the realisation of nostalgia through interpersonal interaction and bodily engagement between the memory activist and the veteran who reflects his or her own 'embattled glory' (Diamant, 2010) in Chinese history. More than just a post-socialist fever ignited by the market economy, nostalgia is embodied by veteran heroes, and it contributes to the trans-generational transmission of collective memory through daily interactions. Through a close examination of the social production of a lost past, we observe the creative use of nostalgia in memory making through which the voices erased by political propaganda have been raised again in a form that resembles or co-opts the vocabulary and themes of official discourse. On the surface, the volunteering efforts of the PLA veterans fits the CCP's more recent campaign to glorify national heroes. However, heroic stories retold by the PLA veterans expose how the party-state has mistreated those who sacrificed much for the Chinese nation, tacitly destabilising the CCP's hegemonic narrative.

In the following paragraphs, I will unpack the formation of two groups of veterans within the redress movement through the story of Yan Bing, a once-mysterious figure belonging to the online redress activist community who boasted of his achievements in helping the KMT veterans but kept his real-life a secret from other activists. In his story, we can see how the redress activists'

re-imagining of the past transcends political parties and ideologies by linking the two groups together in a nostalgic present.

In the first week of my fieldwork as a volunteer in the summer of 2015, I heard stories about a man named Yan Bing who had managed to locate more than thirty KMT veterans in the remotest mountain areas of Hunan province. Most urban redress activists never met him personally but always mentioned him, referring to him as an important figure who joined the NGO in 2013 and impressed everyone with his rapid rate of success. However, despite expressing a general admiration for the number of KMT veterans he had found and the photos he took of them, few of the other activists knew anything about him.

Intrigued, I sent a text message to Bing via WeChat and asked him about joining his team. When he replied, he invited me to visit him at any time, even on workdays. This struck me as unusual as the volunteers usually organised their caregiving activities for the veterans at weekends. When I asked about his job, he refused to discuss it, telling me, 'You will know when you are here'.

I took him up on his offer and, after a 7-hour bus trip through southwest China's serpentine hillsides, I arrived in the highland county where Yan Bing lived and volunteered. Getting off the bus and stepping onto a stone bridge in the pre-dawn gloom, I saw that Bing and three others were waiting for me. After a brief introduction, they passed me a blue T-shirt to wear as a uniform for a visit to verify a potential hero. Bing explained to me that they had just received a clue that an elderly man in a nearby village had fought against the Japanese invaders during the war. Bing explained that our group, along with two journalists from the local newspaper, would immediately be visiting the 93-year-old man.

At dawn, two cars carrying Bing's team and the group of journalists drove along the unmade road to the small village where the potential KMT veteran lived and, just before sunrise, we arrived at his dilapidated house. From the window outside, we looked into a cold, damp room where we saw a skinny old man lying in bed under a greyish-black mosquito net. Except for Bing and his peers, nobody dared to get too close; an offensive odour wafted from the room. Bing walked inside, picked up the disabled, elderly man, and put him on a chair. He then asked his team members to confirm the man's identity. The journalists tentatively began to take photos from a distance. It was extremely difficult to communicate with the elderly man as he was 93 years old, in poor health, and found it difficult to speak. When they raised his ragged trousers, his badly mutilated right foot, covered in flies, was revealed to us. Unperturbed, Bing waved the flies away and asked the journalist and I to take photos of the veteran's mutilated right foot and to film the old man's living conditions and general impoverishment.

As the sky grew darker outside, I thought Bing was going to give up on the so-far unsuccessful interview when all of a sudden somebody shouted, 'That is it! We found the evidence (for verifying him as a hero)'. What they had found was a scar on the man's belly – a two-inch long pink scar that was left by a stabbing bayonet. Flashlights shone on the old wound while Bing promised the elderly veteran that he would bring a monthly subsidy from an NGO in Hunan. Bing and his colleagues then left some bread and milk for the old man before we set off again, heading back to the local town. On the way back, Bing introduced me properly to his 'brothers-in-arms', the three companions on his team whose shared identity originated in both the team they formed in order to care for the KMT veterans and their shared experience of serving in the PLA. From them, I learned about their devotion to the movement. Bing explained to me how he recruited his 'brothers' who served in the army, how the team acted promptly once clues to the heroes' whereabouts were found, how they verified the potential heroes in their community,² and how they showed belated respect to the KMT veterans after many years of hardship. Due to the limited time that elderly KMT veterans have left in their lives, Bing said that the team was racing against the clock to confirm their identities and get them help.

After the 40-minute drive, the ‘brothers-in-arms’ of Bing’s team bid farewell to each other and their leader and I went out for some food. Eating noodles at a street stall, I asked Bing about his past as a soldier in the PLA. And eventually our conversation got around to stories about his post-military life and what had driven him to be a leader of a squad of redress activists.

Having joined the army when he was 16, Bing was assigned to the South China Sea to guard the southernmost border region of the Chinese state, where international incidents involving the military were most frequent. He said he missed living near the sea so much that he kept a picture taken during his period of service in his wallet. Whilst he was talking, he pointed to the battleship in the background. Proudly enthusiastic, he lectured me on how advanced the landing craft of the navy were and how meaningful the 2 years he had worked at the southern base had been for him.

I examined the picture carefully. Clad in the sky-blue and lime-green military fatigues of the PLA Navy-Marine Corps, Bing was standing in front of a battleship docked at the quayside, with bright sunshine reflecting on the water. However, after a 12-year military career, he had had to go back to his hometown of Ruoguang, deep inside the Chinese hinterland and far from the sea, because routes to further promotion were closed to him. Finishing his noodles, Bing pointed to a small sentry box in the muddy road, ‘You want to know about my job, right? There, I work as a *chengguan* now, you are now on the street that I’m in charge of’.

The photo Bing proudly showed me symbolised for him a glorious past, a past that contrasted sharply with his less than glorious present and a job which is widely derided across China (Hanser, 2016). ‘*chengguan*’ literally means an administrator of the city and designates somebody who is a low-ranking, pseudo-police officer. Typing ‘*chengguan*’ into Baidu, the main search engine in mainland China, brings up images or caricatures that usually portray *chengguan* officers as violent, uncaring, obese and ugly men in uniform, often accosting a poor street vendor. On Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, 70,000 people posted the above caricature (Figure 1), ‘My Child, Mother Cannot Hug You’. The illustration displays the negative stereotypes associated with Bing’s occupation and the feelings of sympathy people direct towards those who are apprehended by the *chengguan* on urban streets all over the PRC.

By circulating visual and textual materials about the brutality of some *chengguan* officers online, netizens are also expressing their anger and dissatisfaction towards inequality and injustice in Chinese society. On WeChat groups where members of activist groups from Hunan province gather, netizens discuss who should be conscripted to join the military if a third world war was to break out. The typical response is something like: the ‘*chengguan* should be sent to the frontlines first due to their cold-blooded nature and brutality’.

Comments like this, which were frequent in people’s daily online conversations, offended Bing. He recounted to me that he only responded once to such comments by mentioning that *chengguan* were human beings who also had parents and children, just like everybody else. Although he did not reveal that he himself was a *chengguan* when responding, his comments were still met with teasing and joking. As a result, he typically remained silent and never mentioned his job in cyber communities. In his words, ‘most of them do not give me basic respect. I choose to say less and do more (to help the veterans)’.

Bing could tolerate the online stigmatisation of the *chengguan*, but as an ex-serviceman, he found the discrimination he and others faced harder to swallow. For volunteers like Bing, their identity as soldiers underpinned their devotion to helping the KMT veterans. While Bing felt that being a soldier connected him (and his ex-servicemen peers) with the national heroes, other volunteers without military experience had a contradictory perception of the servicemen - namely that, those who had fought in the war under the KMT are heroes, while those who served in the PLA after the war are uneducated and inferior. For example, during Chinese Army Day (1 August), a day of commemoration created by the CCP to celebrate the anniversary of the PLA’s establishment



Figure 1. The general perception of Chengguan is not a good one, as this image taken from the Weibo social media platform demonstrates. As she's arrested by the chengguan officer, the tearful mother tells her daughter there's no way she can carry her.

Source: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_48b0c0fe0101h50l.html.

in 1927, Bing and his peers visited KMT veterans whom they considered as exemplary soldiers who saved the Chinese nation during the war. When one of Bing's peers posted a selfie with a KMT veteran on WeChat with the description 'Happy Army Day, you (referring to the KMT veteran) are an authentic hero and exemplary soldier in my mind!', it was met with waves of criticism. Comments included, 'You are brainwashed by the CCP and showing your ignorance. Our heroes have nothing to do with this stupid day celebrating the formation of the PLA, an evil, violent force oppressing Chinese people'. This comment came from another volunteer who was a middle school teacher in Changsha, Hunan's provincial capital. When Bing's peer tried to explain the volunteer peers, he was trolled by similarly derisive comments. As a result, three of Bing's peers exited the group because they didn't feel respected. But Bing stayed on WeChat as the representative of their team, continuing to update them with relevant information and distribute funding. He repeated his mantra to his friends: 'Talk less and do more. Just take action to help our heroes and ignore what they say'. When I interviewed three of the volunteers who had trolled Bing, all of them were unaware of the existence of ex- PLA servicemen in their volunteer community.

Bing's response is typical of the ways in which this group of volunteers deal with online hostility: they contribute more and talk less. This is the reason why most of their urban counterparts know a lot about their achievements in helping the veterans but nothing about their earlier career. The past that Bing and his peers consider as glorious and meaningful only brings them hostility in the present. 'The more veterans I visit, the more I understand what a soldier fights for. We (referring to both the KMT veterans and himself) ask for nothing but very basic respect', said Bing as

we walked at midnight along the dark, unpaved streets of the area he patrolled as a *chengguan*. Before our farewell, Bing advised me to go to sleep early since we would have a big celebration the next day for the birthday of the very first veteran he had helped, a man who would be turning 100 years old.

The next morning, I met Bing, who, although dressed in his *chengguan* uniform, had managed to skip work. Waiting for me were four cars carrying some twenty volunteers, most of whom were recruited the night before. At some point, Bing changed out of his *chengguan* uniform and into the uniform of his volunteer unit: a t-shirt featuring a printed a map of Hunan province. When we met, he talked excitedly about the upcoming celebration,

We are going to have a hustle and bustle of a ceremony for the hero who is 100 years old today! This grandpa loves big events with a lot of people. He lived alone for more than two decades. The first day I met him, he was kneeling on the ground. His neighbours were initially suspicious of us seeking out a “counter-revolutionary”. In great anger, I warned the neighbours not to humiliate such a senior soldier in his 90s. Today, it is another good opportunity to overturn the injustice that the grandpa suffered! Our joyful and cheerful ritual will amaze the whole village. In the future, nobody will dare to disrespect this hero who protected the motherland during the war.

Bing drove fast to our destination, and when we arrived, we could see people were already there, decorating the house in red for the celebration. A bakery in the town, owned by Bing’s friend, provided a birthday cake with 10-layers for the veteran. Supporting the happy elderly man as he left his room and took a seat in the yard of his home, Bing lined everybody up and asked me whether I could offer the proper salute. ‘I sent instructions to today’s participants on how to do a proper salute. Did you learn?’ Believing (mistakenly) that the instructions were only for volunteers who were, like Bing, ex-servicemen from the PLA, I had not paid any attention to them. Sensing my embarrassment, Bing agreed that I could forego the salute and work as a photographer instead. After arranging the participants who were able to properly perform the gesture into two, neat rows, Bing stood with his ‘brothers-in-arms’ at the very front, facing the veteran. ‘Attention! . . . Salute!’ Bing ordered as he led the whole group in an expression of respect for the elderly hero (Figure 2).

Bing’s salute to the KMT veteran can also be read as a gesture to his own personal past, to the time when he was himself a soldier, but in the PLA. Mentioning the first time he helped the veterans, he shared with me the most heart-breaking salute he had ever witnessed in person.

You know I did not have much culture (referring to his educational background). I never knew about the existence of this group of forgotten national heroes who fought the Japanese invaders but now live in extreme poverty. After I was discharged from the army, I found I always got bored by my job and learned to surf the Internet. The first thing I did was to search for forums where ex-servicemen from the PLA gathered, and brothers-in-arms could share their difficulties after demobilisation and organise reunions on Army Day. Stories and photos of heroic soldiers are another common topic of conversation there online. One day, a post entitled, “Look at the Real Life of a National Hero” caught my attention. After clicking the link, an elderly man in a tattered military coat was saluting a coffin, the only furniture in his house. When I learned that this man, who was living like a dog, was a KMT veteran who fought during the War of Resistance, an immensely complicated mixture of feelings washed over me: anger, guilt, shame and confusion. How could the state and our society treat a man who had sacrificed his entire life to the protection of the motherland like this? As an (ex-)soldier, how can I allow this kind of injustice to happen? With this self-reflection and raft of complicated feelings, I started to search for War of Resistance veterans. It turned out to be an endless journey. The more injustice I witnessed, the heavier the burden on my shoulders.

A bodily gesture like the military salute symbolises the identity of a soldier while also bridging a gap between a KMT veteran living in socio-political limbo and Bing, who was struggling with his



Figure 2. Bing, dressed in the uniform of his volunteer group, salutes a veteran who is celebrating his 100th birthday. (Photo taken by the author).

own post-service loss of status. As such, the act of seeking out and caring for the forgotten heroes provides an opportunity for former soldiers like Bing to re-experience their lives in the military. Volunteer teams formed by the former PLA soldiers prefer a militarised style of activism that includes setting targets for the number of veterans they need to find, and even the number of minutes they should spend on each visit. Their dedication has meant that Bing and his peers successfully found and helped those KMT veterans who live in the most remote rural areas where few other urban volunteers were willing to visit. Bing considered the job he was doing as one of safeguarding the history of a group who were on the verge of being forgotten by society. Bing's group's process of remembering involved collecting oral histories and performing important bodily gestures like the salute, a form of body language connecting the KMT veterans with the activist-PLA servicemen.

Jie Yong was the second member of Bing's team. He first met Bing via a PLA veteran online forum. Talking to me about his first time encountering a KMT veteran, Jie also mentioned the salute. Jie recalled how he had received his first mission from Bing in the run up to Army Day. His task was to deliver a souvenir banner embroidered with the words, 'Backbone of the Chinese Nation, Hero of the Resistance War (against Japan)' to a veteran he had never met. Jie described how it was noon when he arrived at the veteran's house. The old man, in his early 90s, could not hear Jie due to hearing difficulties, nor could he read the banner's wording because he was illiterate. Embarrassed, Jie stood ramrod straight and directed a standard military salute towards the elderly veteran. The KMT veteran suddenly understood then that Jie was Bing's associate, and another volunteer, formerly of the PLA, who had come to pay respect for what he had done as a soldier during the war.



Figure 3. A volunteer checking a veteran's scars as a journalist invited by the volunteers films the situation (photo taken by the author).

The salute, then, is part of a symbolic language among soldiers of all stripes, even ones of different armies. As Bing emphasised, 'What we have is a spirit of "taking action" instead of talking. From scars, we can tell their sacrifice; from the salute they perform, we know they are soldiers! That is something only we, soldiers, can understand'. Even after demobilisation, the ex-PLA servicemen still identify as soldiers. With their commitment to honouring the forgotten heroes, it is if they received a new mission and can again form a brotherhood, but this time one with veterans who used to belong to a rival political camp.

Through these two stories above, I demonstrate how both silences and salutes are central to the manifestation of nostalgia. When visiting the veterans, even for occasions such as the celebration of a birthday, this group of volunteers were usually lost for words and would, instead of speaking, perform salutes as an expression of their respect for the veterans (Figure 3). This action was an embodied form of remembering that also constructed a sense of belonging. Only those who were once part of the PLA and called each other 'brothers who have carried guns together (*yiqi kangguo qiang de xiongdi*)', an intimate expression akin to 'brothers-in-arms', were recruited by Bing. Their schedules were conducted with military precision and it was common for them to work until two or three o'clock in the morning because many of the veterans they located lived in remote areas. When asked why they cared about the KMT veterans, they would reply with a simple sentence: 'I am a soldier too! (*wo yeshi ge junren*)'. When asked what they would do after all the KMT veterans had passed away, the ex-servicemen said that they would extend their caring to veterans of the Vietnam War and the Korean War. To win respect for those who had sacrificed themselves for the nation, they aimed to first generate publicity for the KMT veterans. They then hoped to

promote the idea of sacrificing individual desires for a greater cause, as well as encourage the values of personal responsibility, loyalty and faith amongst the collective community.

Searching for the key to true love. The mistreatment of veterans in Chinese society creates a type of moralistic incongruity. The archetypes of the heroic figures who sacrificed their lives to defend the Chinese nation in political propaganda have unfortunately been living in severe economic difficulty, which have left them in socio-political limbo. How people treat those who return from the battlefield or military service constitutes the core of what Diamant (2011) calls 'everyday patriotism' (p. 11). It is highly relevant to today's China under Xi Jinping because he heads a party which has buttressed its legitimacy through a new wave of nationalism rooted in military victory. The way in which the demobilised members of the military are treated under the CCP significantly shapes the future of Chinese society. However, compared to the extensive literature on activism regarding migrant workers and other disadvantaged groups, studies on activism for military veterans are strikingly scarce. Diamant argues that this intellectual bias is a result of an assumption that those who serve in the military represent those who are conservative, nationalistic and obedient. In the Chinese context, where the military is under the absolute control of the Communist Party, this assumption is far more entrenched.

To challenge this intellectual bias, the following paragraphs highlight the private lives and love stories of these ex-servicemen who are assumed to be 'brainwashed' by notions of collectivism and nationalism. But by showing how memory activists express their desire for true love, a core element of the concepts of modernity and individualism, my analysis provides an alternative perspective from which to view the identity of the former PLA soldiers. From the perspective of the individual, demobilisation does not merely mean the loss of an occupation they sometimes gloried in. In addition to that loss, the institutional shift in their lives changed how they were seen in their domestic lives, where they have been transformed from being desired to undesired lovers and husbands.

Love, as Guo (2020) argues, is a political act in China. Tracing the genealogy of this affective concept in modern China since the late Qing Dynasty, the very term love, *ai* in Chinese, has been used by the May Fourth intellectuals to express individual freedom (Lee, 2006; Pan, 2015; Zhu, 2017). It has also been politicised by revolutionary politicians to mobilise the emotions of the masses. It has been additionally popularised by the CCP to cultivate the moral superiority of being loyal to the state (Guo, 2020). Through a close examination of terms related to love in contemporary China, Guo distinguishes romantic love (*aiqing*) and patriotic love (*aiguo*) in political language and moral discourse. Moving from content analysis, anthropologists extend our understating of the appropriation of love to an economic setting in which the desire for romantic love has been repackaged as the marker of social status in post-Mao China (Griffiths et al., 2010; Rofel, 1999; Zhu, 2018; Wen, 2020). My analysis on the adaptation of love in the redress movement shows how this multi-faceted concept has become entangled in memory-making, blurring the boundaries scholars draw between romantic love, patriotic love and commodified romance. By contextualising love as a site of contestation for framing the past and the present, this approach integrates the politics of affect into memory studies. The pages that follow therefore examine how demobilised PLA soldiers like Yan Bing articulate the concept of true love (*zhenai*) in the photographs they create for the KMT veterans' and their partners. Through the action of recording what they perceive as the vanished love that blends patriotism and an enduring relational bond, these memory acts challenge the concept of commodified romance and economic inequality prevailing in Chinese society.

It is worth noticing that the way memory activists interpret love is innovative. Instead of confronting the commodified conceptualisation of love, the ex-PLA members deliberately fit the stories of the KMT veterans with the theme of romance celebrated by modern day, consumerist

festivals. Sharing the same theme, stories and photographs regarding the KMT veterans' love, this foregrounds the dark side of the economic development in China. While the urban middle-class celebrate 'love' with luxurious commodities, elderly couples in their 90s live in poverty in undeveloped rural areas, struggling towards the end of their lives. On the surface, the ex-PLA members are motivated by what they consider to be the enduring love of KMT veteran couples. However, what makes the romantic representation of these couples stand out is the way it contrasts with idealised love as moulded and promoted by consumerism in post-reform China.

Song is a common means for expressing love of all types across nearly all societies. After volunteering with the former members of the PLA for 3 months, I noticed that the men played a specific genre of army songs in their car during our long journeys. As propaganda tools, songs in the PLA support the dissemination of political ideology amongst the armed forces personnel and convey clear messages about personal conduct, family virtues and loyalty to the authorities (Hung, 1996; Perris, 1983). In post-socialist China, the themes of love, relationships and family prevail in military songs. When asked about their favourite songs whilst in the army, the majority of my informants recommended to me a song they hailed as 'a love song that no *bing gege* could resist'.

The term *bing gege*, which literally means 'soldier elder-brother' in Chinese, is a term of endearment used by women towards their male partners who are PLA soldiers. *Bing gege* originated from a song of the same name, a song produced by the official choir of the PLA. The ballad tells the story of the female lover of a PLA soldier. In the narrative of *bing gege*, the lover calls herself *meimei*, or younger sister. The dichotomy of *bing gege* and *meimei* produces the ideal militaristic gender relation, where men are valiant fighters for the nation and women are loyal housewives.

The volunteers informed me that when they themselves had been *bing gege*, they also adored the song, 'While Your Black Hair Brushed My Rifle' (Wang, 1997). In contrast to the song *bing gege*, this love song is sung by a male PLA soldier. Bing shared with me the touching story behind this song that he had heard in the military. The composer, like Bing, was a former member of the navy. One day, he was on sentry duty with a rifle in hand. A beautiful lady in a white dress with long, black hair passed by. The wind blew, and her hair brushed the rifle slightly, causing the soldier's heart to beat faster. However, he tried his hardest to remain unmoved, not turning to look at the girl. The song's lyrics start with that very scene:

*When your hair flies over my gun,
Don't blame me, for I remain solemn-faced.
Even though I am unyielding and sentimental,
The fires of youth need to be kept in cold storage temporarily.
Though it is a short and long time since I became a soldier,
Don't say I don't know love, but only have masculinity.
Though the world has the flames of war,
The fragrance of flowers remains, and*

*My tomorrow will become as romantic as yours.
When your hands leave my shoulders,
I won't turn around and burst into tears.
Perhaps our roads are not in the same direction
But I still deliver my best blessing to you – my girl.
If I take off this military uniform someday in future,
I won't complain if you didn't wait for me.
Though you and I may be in different places at that time,
You must see my love flying together with the flag.³*

This military song about ideal love was very popular among the demobilised PLA soldiers. The hair and gun are important symbols in the song. The girl's smooth and straight black hair symbolises the passivity and obedience of women, while the gun is a sign of masculinity, indicating a combination of military strength and male virility. Whereas ideal love and manhood are evoked through the soldier's monologue, the woman in the song is portrayed as the one who should wait while the man devotes himself to the country. This restrained sexual desire symbolises an idealised romantic love between a man and a woman.

Although the soldiers retained a sense of the collective after being demobilised, their return to a society increasingly shaped by neoliberalism and an emergent individualism, along with conflicts in their private lives and a high divorce rate, ruined any yearning for 'pure and true love'.

The ex-PLA volunteers' unfading appreciation of the love songs they listened to when in the military was sharply contrasted by the reality of their marriages. On our way back to the county seat after the birthday party, Bing received calls every half an hour from his wife, Hua, who was from the same city in Guangdong province where Bing had served. From what he overheard of their quarrel, Jie told me that Hua had found out that Bing had secretly skipped work again. Bing lowered his voice and promised he would be back home before 17:00 that evening. Ending the conversation with Hua, Bing joked to me, 'Life for us is tough, right? I successfully escaped from the office for this celebration but still got caught by my wife'. To comfort Bing, Jie said, 'Hua is a good wife. At least she has given up trying to persuade you to become a migrant worker in her hometown!'

Later I learned that Jie had divorced his wife in 2014, one and a half years after he had been discharged from the army. The reason he gave was that it was due to their differing expectations as far as Jie's career development was concerned. Like those in rural areas across the PRC's inland provinces, most of the young men in this county go to work in the developed coastal regions. Bing, Jie and two other team members were exceptions to the norm in their willingness to work in low-ranking jobs assigned by local government. Given their age and limited education, they naturally struggled to compete in the labour market, but also felt that they were being isolated and discriminated against by their social peers. Jie had worked on the security gate of a state-owned-enterprise in town (SOE). But only 6 months into the job he quit, because, in his words, he was 'looked down upon by colleagues' – something which further exacerbated the growing animosity between him and his ex-wife.

The career and marital struggles of the ex-servicemen of the PLA, who have often been described as 'army riffraff (*bin pi*)', can be understood as structural issues that are linked to the negative stereotypes assigned to them. For example, 'Brainwashed by the communist ideology', 'uneducated and stubborn' and 'violent and not gentlemanly-like' were all common phrases used to describe ex-servicemen from the PLA during my interviews with private entrepreneurs and white-collar, urbanite informants. Such negative judgements and prejudice towards ex-members of the military are the result of a 'new hegemony' that emerged in post-1980s China (Davies, 2005; Diamant, 2010, 2015; Rofel, 1999). The PLA, as a pillar-like institution of the Party-state's sovereignty, is still dominated by a collective mind-set and the legacy of Maoist thinking in terms of army-building. However, these two ideologies have been eclipsed by an emphasis on economic development and individualism which has shaped social life in the post-socialist era. As a result, most low-ranking demobilised members of the PLA have been labelled 'losers' (Diamant, 2010) for their lack of vocational training and any higher educational degree.

Echoing Diamant's findings, difficulty in marrying or maintaining marital relationships is ubiquitous among PLA veterans. However, during a PLA veteran's period of service, the divorce rate of PLA couples is not so prominent because a soldier's marriage is regulated by Criminal Law. Applications for divorce raised by the wife of a PLA member have to be approved by the military and any behaviour harming a military marriage could be deemed criminal (National People's

Congress of the PRC, 1997). Still, when a husband is discharged, his wife is 'freed' from these restrictions. It was common amongst the spouses of the volunteers I met that they had asked for a divorce after their husbands had lost their status and security as a PLA soldier. Their status as soldiers in the army secured their family lives and careers, forging their shared identity as guardians of the motherland. They cherished the life in which everyone shared in the *esprit de corps* generated by the notion of personal sacrifice for a greater cause.

Longing for what they had lost, the ex-servicemen of the PLA created a new definition of love and romance for themselves through their care for the KMT veterans. In mid-May 2016, Bing excitedly informed me that he had just received sponsorship from a private foundation in Shenzhen. It was to fund his proposal to publicise, using photography, memorable stories of the KMT war heroes and their partners. Bing called the programme 'Searching for the Key to Love (*xunzhao aiqing de fuma*)'. He told me, 'This idea, to publicise memorable stories about war heroes and their partners, came to me 3 years ago, when three of my brothers in our team went through divorces'. Bing believed that the high divorce rate amongst demobilised soldiers from the PLA was due to society becoming increasingly shallow. 'People nowadays are too superficial. They only have money on their minds. The first veteran couple I met lived in an isolated mountain area. When I found them, they were farming by standing with their bare feet in yellow mud. I could not hold back my tears. Seventy years of a miserable life had not divided them', he said.

The photoshoots for Bing's scheme were time-consuming and demanding. One early Saturday morning in May, when the weather was humid and muggy, seven of us gathered in a square in front of the local municipal government building. While waiting for the remaining four members of our group, Bing decided to start briefing the lighting and cosmetic staff who were new to the project, telling them that 'To document love in real life is our mission'. Those who had encountered failed relationships in their own lives were visibly moved by what Bing told them about the elderly couples' example of enduring love.

Before photoshoots began, the volunteers would routinely interview the couples to hear their 'love stories'. Instructing his colleagues, Bing said, 'The questions you ask should be relevant to love, marriage and family'. Bing also told them that, ideally, he would like the photographic images to realistically reflect the couples' everyday lives. By the time he'd finished speaking, at around 8AM, the whole group had arrived, and with the briefing session over, we set off with a renewed sense of enthusiasm.

In four cars, we traversed uneven roads for over 2 hours until arriving at a redbrick bungalow encircled by a web of clotheslines. As the team set up the equipment, Jie looked for appropriate backdrops for the photos. The couple we had come to photograph sat waiting in a dim room. The veteran had just returned from the hospital after suffering an acute stroke, leading to a loss of hearing and the ability to clearly articulate his thoughts. His wife Ying, who welcomed us, stood with the aid of crutches donated by a local enterprise. The couple, just ordinary peasants in the village, were dressed in stained t-shirts, long trousers and shabby plastic slippers. 'So many kind-hearted people are visiting us today', said Ying, smiling. As Bing explained to the newest volunteers, 'Usually, only one or two of us come to deliver materials or visit the couple. This visit is much more frantic!'

Jie had chosen a small bamboo grove in the yard in front of the house as the backdrop for the photos. Three female volunteers recruited to do wardrobe and make-up from the barbershop next to Jie's house helped Ying to get dressed for the shoot, while other volunteers dressed the veteran, Mr Chen, in a black suit, white shirt and bow tie that was worn directly over his grimy old T-shirt. Bing urged the girls to start with the interview, saying 'Do not forget to ask the grandma about their love stories! We need to hurry up'. This information about the couples' private life was usually collected from the wives of the veterans because they tended to be younger and more articulate.

When I entered the room, Ying was sitting stiffly in her chair whilst volunteers styled her hair and did her make-up. 'Grandma, I want to know when you married Grandpa Chen?' Jane, one of the female volunteers, asked loudly. Ying replied, 'He was 30 in 1955, and considered an old bachelor! I was 18 but still single because of my 'black' family history'. That 'black' background was a result of Ying's father being classed a 'landlord' by the CCP. Nevertheless, her parents finally arranged her marriage. 'What kind of criteria did you have for finding a groom at that time?' queried one of the girls, a typical question young people will ask each other before they start dating in the PRC.

In many matchmaking situations, it is considered normal to inquire about a prospective partner's living conditions, with regards to income and property ownership. Ying, shaking her head in sorrow, said, 'After all our lands were taken, life was tough! We were starving. So, what could I ask for? A single meal was enough!' In an attempt to change the topic, Jane, another of the volunteers, asked, 'Tell me about your wedding! What was the ritual like?' The response surprised her. 'Wedding? We did not even have a marriage certificate', Ying said. Jane continued, 'What did grandpa promise you in the banquet in front of all your friends and relatives?' 'How can I remember? Maybe he said nothing', said Ying. 'How could that be? Grandma, please think carefully. What were your feelings during this most important moment in your life?' Jane persisted. No matter how hard Jane and the other girls tried, Ying just repeated that she could not remember many details about the wedding. Jane then turned the topic of conversation to Ying's married life, 'So have you been happy in your marriage?' Ying's reply concentrated only on the bitterness of their marital life. It seemed that Mr Chen was ill-tempered and had not helped in farming nor eased their domestic burdens. She had had to take care of their two children and work hard during peak agricultural seasons. When she recalled thrashing corn on her own in the cold rain during her pregnancy, tears ran down her face. The 1-hour session ahead of the photoshoot had provoked in Ying feelings of sadness rather than happiness about her union with Mr Chen.

When Bing announced that everything was ready, three girls assisted Ying, walking with her to the front of the house. Her weak physique made walking the 10m a slow process and, as Ying held on to her crutches, one volunteer supported her weight, while another two prevented her white wedding dress from being dirtied by the muddy ground.

As the conversation with Ying failed to provide new inspiration for the shoot, the photographer merely suggested some standard poses to the couple, who were now dressed in wedding attire. The most frequent instructions were 'Please look at grandpa, grandma', or, 'Smile and get closer to your husband'. Only Ying was able to follow this guidance. Throughout the whole process, Mr Chen looked numb and was slow to respond. The photographer sometimes stopped to show Ying the picture on his camera; Ying giggled like a shy young girl when she saw the images. I too checked the photos on the camera – the photographer had managed to take 67 pictures before the sunshine apparently became too bright to continue. Bing reviewed all the images carefully to make sure that they had enough to choose from.

After the session, Jie tried to help Mr Chen to stand up. His attempts annoyed Mr Chen and the veteran slapped away his hands firmly and stood up by himself. Dragging himself along using a walking frame, he headed back towards the house. Having entered the room, he started murmuring in what seemed like a hostile way. While we were confused by his behaviour, Ying struggled over to bring him a cup of water. But Mr Chen would not stop complaining. 'He was ordering me to get some water for him. That is what he is, a rude old man! When I was carrying our second child, he just stood by and did nothing to help release me from my heavy farming burden', Ying explained to us softly. Bing helped Ying to sit down and said: 'Your life has been so difficult and yet you still keep the notion of love alive in your mind. That's what lights up your life, right?' This question was met with silence. During the exhausting journey back to the city, the four ex-servicemen were in



Figures 4. Chen and Ying in the 'before' photos posted online by Bing.



Figures 5. Chen and Ying in the 'after' photos posted online by Bing.

high spirits and asked their colleagues to start writing an article for their WeChat official account, where they would publicise the images. Their mission was to 'search for the key to love', yet, there was a crucial problem: how to deal with the failure to collect romantic stories and deal instead with the harsh realities of life for the elderly couple?

Three months into the photoshoot project, on China's own Valentine's Day (the 7th day of the 7th month in the lunar calendar), Bing launched the photographs online. On Bing's Weibo page, a post titled 'Love Which Can Withstand Great Hardship (*renpin fengchuiyuda de aiqing*)' showed two digitally edited portraits of Chen and Ying (Figures 4 and 5), presented side-by-side. One photograph showed the couple before the makeover, and another after their transformation. The photos were captioned with two paragraphs:

Chen was born in 1925 and joined the army at the age of fifteen. After the War, he returned to his village. He was tall and handsome. However, even with his pleasant appearance, marriage would be a challenge as he was already 30. Through their relatives' networks, Ying, who was 18 and as beautiful as a flower, was introduced to Chen. She was hard-working and smart but still single because of her political identity as the daughter of a landlord. It was a match made in heaven, so they got married. The details of the wedding day have been lost over time. What the grandma recalls is the bitterness of the past. Mr Chen was a soldier with

a decisive mind and an ill temper. He worked so hard that Ying alone took responsibility for all the domestic work. During her pregnancy, she had to do all farming work in the cold wind and rain. She listened to her husband's commands and worked like a man. Even now, Ying still takes care of Mr Chen. Although Mr Chen is mostly immobile and talks with difficulty, he retains the personality of a soldier. Even small things upset him. Enduring this misery, Ying never complains. When summoned, she immediately goes to him.

Only true love could withstand such great hardship. I think there must be love (*aiqing*愛情) between them. Otherwise, how could they bear such unhappy circumstances? To take a photo of this couple is not merely the recording of an image. Their marriage, family, and pure love are a spiritual legacy for the next generation of our Chinese Nation. [Highlighted as in the original text]

The structure was clear: beginning with a biography of the veteran, it then described how the couple had met and their difficulties in daily life before ending with the volunteers' interpretation of the couple's 'love'. In their interpretation and recreation of the couple's daily lives, these ex-PLA members attempted to show how the elderly couples, like Chen and Ying, overcame difficulties with a courage and spirit that, in their view, no longer exists in contemporary society. The documentation of the enduring love of hero couples was an ongoing project for Bing and his peers. Bing told me that he had rediscovered his old hobby of photography after becoming a volunteer and that he enjoyed taking photos that captured the unfortunate reality of KMT veteran couples. On what was Valentine's Day 2017 in the western world, he once again shared his photographs of the elderly couples and their impoverished lives, attaching them to the following post,

You guys show off red roses, chocolate, and lip balm sticks from your lover. That is not a big deal. Come see couples grow old with each other and help each other while in humble circumstances. This situation is the true love people today should be desperate for.

This protest against contemporary portrayals of romantic love which promote consumerism gives voice to the demobilised soldiers of the PLA who feel that contemporary China has lost the spirit of self-sacrifice for a greater good and the capacity to endure hardship. As Appadurai (1996) suggests, the past is 'a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios, a kind of temporal central casting, to which recourse can be taken as appropriate' (p. 45). The KMT veteran couples' daily lives were thus recorded and portrayed as examples of a kind of love that reflected a past social ethos. Volunteers like Bing initiated the photography project to record what they considered to be 'true love' in their own Chinese context. Their project was driven by a desire to celebrate not the heroic fighting of the national heroes, but rather, as Jie himself suggested, 'real-life love'. Through their nostalgic imaginings of this kind of love, the ex-servicemen of the PLA were able to give voice to the frustrations within their own lives. As they celebrated the enduring 'love' of the elderly couples living in poverty, they were able to imagine a happy ending to the kind of love referred to in the army love song discussed above. It was certainly that love they tried to portray in their photographic representations of the KMT heroes.

Conclusion: Evocative memories and veteran activism

Moving beyond the dichotomy of the state and the oppressed in the activists' realm, this study shows the complexity and diversity of war commemoration in a post-socialist, authoritarian regime in East Asia. Instead of producing an alternative and oppositional version of the official history, the non-elite activists featured here create what I will call 'evocative memories'. This analytical term is inspired by Humphrey's (1994) revision of James Scott's concept of the 'hidden transcript'.

Humphrey argues that ‘non-state counter-memory’ in an oppressive social context differs from the resistance that Scott describes as hidden in the private sphere. Instead, these memories are deliberately made to be ambiguous. They can be understood as ‘a text that is intended to elicit or evoke a particular interpretation beyond the surface meaning’ (Humphrey, 1994: 38). On the surface, and within the redress movement, the counter-memories of the activists are in accordance with the state’s propaganda on nationalism, as well as the notion of consumerist romance that has become ubiquitous in post-reform China. It is only through a close examination of the social production of these memories that we observe the particular interpretations of the past from the activists’ point of view, and their unheard and marginalised voices in history. We can thus observe the entanglement of nostalgia and love in the activists’ struggle to establish their own interpretations of the past. While the nostalgic yearning of the ex-servicemen for a lost past reveals their straitened circumstance after demobilisation, their pursuit of true ‘love’ exposes the economic inequality that is obscured by a hegemonic discourse rooted in consumerism in contemporary China. The interconnection between these two themes blurs the boundaries between the private and the public, the individual and the collective, as well as the local and the national in remembering the past.

Through ethnographic research into how PLA ex-servicemen activists challenge the lack of veteran voices in Chinese war history due, in large part, to the structural constraints veteran communities face, this study provides new insight into the politics of remembering the war and the role of veterans in history-making in post-socialist China. With a focus on KMT and PLA veterans, it shows how the shared identity of ‘soldier’ facilitates the intergenerational transmission of war memories and it argues that, beyond a simple dichotomy of state and civil society, other social forces are also at play in the construction of war history in the PRC. For example, the way in which PLA veterans criticise authority is subtle. Without confronting the government, PLA veterans romanticise KMT veterans’ marital lives in order to make visible their personal sufferings and the structural inequality they left behind.

This study also highlights how nostalgia is enacted in daily life, specifically through gestures and storytelling. This ‘embodied nostalgia’ gestures to the past, but it also reflects the position of the veterans as ‘losers’ in the current CCP regime. Finally, by focussing on how the PLA veterans’ own experiences influenced the decisions they made with regards to how to portray the KMT veterans, this paper shows how nostalgia can bring the forgotten past and the lives of those living in the present into the closely-guarded realm of public commemoration.

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ORCID iD

Jacqueline Zhenru Lin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3849-650X>

Notes

1. The fighting between the CCP and the KMT began in the late 1920s. However, following the decision to fight with the Allies against Japan in 1937, it was agreed by the CCP and KMT, that fighting between both parties would temporarily cease until the war against Japan was over. When World War II ended in August 1945, the Civil War resumed until the CCP claimed victory in 1949.
2. During interviews, the redress activists collect information about the veterans' experience of the war, including their unit numbers, the weapons they used, battles they participated in, their camp locations in different periods, etc. After cross-checking the above information, the volunteers are usually able to verify the veterans' identity.
3. The original lyrics in Chinese could be found in the following link: http://www.81.cn/jsdm/2015-04/10/content_6437816.htm. The English translation is mine.

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Author biography

Jacqueline Zhenru Lin is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge. Her main research interests in Second World War commemoration in East Asia, NGOs, charity and Chinese social media. Her dissertation sheds light on a historical-redress movement aiming at re-evaluating the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945) in contemporary China. Foregrounding the institutional production and social networking among different stakeholders, her ethnographic study interrogates a new modality of doing good as featuring in the digital China: the e-commercialised charity. CORRESPONDENCE: St John's College, University of Cambridge, CB2 1TP, Cambridgeshire, UK.