

CHINA'S MEMORIES OF WORLD WAR II AND THE FIGHT AGAINST FORGETTING

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Toronto, Canada (LPC). In the memories of Yang Jianhong's childhood, the sounds of international news from the radio were as familiar as the aroma of hawthorn berry candy. His father, Yang Yangzheng, was a quiet man with an unwavering routine. He would sit intently, listening to the radio broadcasts and savouring the sweet and sour taste of the hawthorn berry candy, a special treat from Shanghai.

Yang Jianhong would only much later understand the significance of this particular candy. It was a taste that brought his father back to a major city in eastern China. A city where, in 1937, a 23-year-old soldier and his comrades fought and held a warehouse against a Japanese force many times their size.

The Chinese soldiers, later immortalized as the "800 Heroes," became a clear symbol of China's struggle in the war. This was China's popular resistance against Japanese aggression, which began much earlier and was later recognized by the world as part of World War II.

China was among the first countries to resist fascist aggression. Many historians consider the Japanese invasion of northeastern China in 1931 as a prelude to the Asian theatre of World War II. China's full-scale war of resistance began in 1937, marking the start of the Asian theatre of World War II. China entered this war before Britain, France, and the United States. Yang defended Shanghai day and night for four days during this battle, losing his left eye in the process. A few days later, the city was conquered.

Yang was wounded but not defeated. He eventually retreated westward to Chongqing, which had become China's wartime capital. Over the years that followed, this southwestern city, nestled among mountains and protected by the Yangtze and Jialing Rivers, became a secure fortress. Like Yang, it welcomed millions of other soldiers and refugees fleeing the chaos of war.

The hawthorn berry candy continued to be a source of solace for Yang, a momentary taste of a past that few knew about. In 2010, Yang, the last surviving member of the "800 Heroes," passed away.

"He was more than a hero of World War II," said his son, Yang Jianhong. "He was the man my mother worshipped all her life," Yang explained. No matter how rare or expensive the candy became, his mother would always find a way to get it for him.

To commemorate Japan's surrender, the family would place a few extra dishes on the table each year. This tradition began when Yang Yangzheng married the woman he loved, just one day after the guns fell silent. Yang's legacy lived on; he was named one of the ten most inspiring people in Chongqing.

The Crucible of War

As the Eastern Front, China's battlefield in the global war against fascism played a decisive role in the Allied victory.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once warned, "If the Japanese should invade the Western Indian Ocean, all our positions in the Middle East would be destroyed. Only China can help us prevent this situation."

Starting the war in 1938, Japan launched a ruthless bombing campaign against Chongqing, aiming to break a city that refused to be broken.

For years, Chongqing endured waves of air raids. The "Asian Blitz," which few are familiar with, killed or wounded more than 32,000 people. The attacks turned the city into a centre of fire and resistance, much like London became during the German Luftwaffe attacks.

With more than 1,600 air-raid shelters throughout Chongqing, it was one of the largest urban defence networks in the world at the time. Su Yuankui, a 92-year-old survivor of these attacks, still feels the pain of those bombings in his mind.

On June 5, 1941, as bombs rained down, eight-year-old Su crawled into an air-raid tunnel. Inside, oil lamps flickered in the suffocating heat, and the roar of fighter planes was mixed with the screams and wails of the people.

When Su awoke the next morning, he was surrounded by corpses. His two sisters were among the more than 1,000 people who died from suffocation and a stampede in what was later deemed one of the deadliest air-raid tragedies of World War II.

"The horizon was a scene of destruction, and not a single building was left intact," Su recalled. Yet, despite all the horror, Chongqing and China as a whole never surrendered. They endured everything and fought on.

During China's popular resistance war against Japanese aggression, the Chinese army and civilians paid a price of 35 million casualties but eliminated more than 50% of Japan's overseas forces, making a tremendous contribution to the victory of the global anti-fascist war.

The Forgotten Ally

Chongqing's importance extended beyond being a target of fascist bombing. It was where crucial decisions of World War II were made, such as joint Sino-Allied campaigns, counterattacks in Myanmar, and mutual aid in the Hump airlift over the Himalayas. The city served as the command centre for the Far East during the global anti-fascist war.

It was from Chongqing that the final dispatches from the Far East were sent, just before the signing of Japan's surrender on the USS Missouri in September 1945.

Former U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt once called the people of Chongqing "strong and unconquerable."

Time magazine journalist Theodore H. White described them as a population united by "a faith in the greatness of China and the spirit to hold their land against the Japanese."

However, unlike Stalingrad or London, this heroic Chinese city has received little recognition. Oxford historian Rana Mitter wrote in his book, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937–1945*, "For many decades, our understanding of this global conflict has failed to properly assess China's role."

In his book, which the *Wall Street Journal* described as giving China its "historical due," Rana Mitter stressed that "If we want to understand China's role in today's global society, we must remind ourselves well of the tragic, titanic struggle that this country waged in the 1930s and 1940s."

At a site where a bomb once created a crater, Chongqing residents erected a wooden tower with the inscription: "Fortress of Bravery." This site now stands as the Liberation Monument, a landmark of the city.

The office where Su Yuankui works is located near the ruins of the "June 5 Tunnel Tragedy." He spoke of his long legal battle to seek justice for the victims of the Japanese bombings in front of a banner that reads, "Defend dignity, uphold justice."

In 2015, a district court in Tokyo, Japan, dismissed the lawsuit brought by Su and 188 other surviving plaintiffs in a shockingly brief court proceeding that lasted a mere 48 seconds.

"You step on someone's feet and then expect an apology from them," said Su. "Let alone expressing regret, these people won't even acknowledge the murder of so many people."

The Ongoing Quest for Peace

At the Chongqing Stilwell Museum, visitors can find the legacy of General Joseph Stilwell, the American commander who fought alongside Chinese soldiers during World War II.

The exhibits, from his Chinese textbooks to the "cloth patches" sewn on the uniforms of American pilots that read: "This foreigner has come to help China. Please save him," are a testament to a shared struggle.

The museum's curator, Taiyan, said, "A museum should not just show history but also the future."

An American visitor recently wrote in the guest book, "May friendship endure, and may the world be acquainted with peace."

Even 80 years later, China, a key Allied nation in World War II, still honours the memories of its struggle against the Axis powers and continues its efforts to preserve and remember them.

Chinese scholars have restored an Oscar-winning documentary film about World War II called *Kukan*, which was screened in the United States in June.

The Stilwell Museum will host a photo exhibition in California, and war artifacts from across China will attract visitors.

For Chinese historian Zhu Yong, the true outcome of the war is still unclear. He said, "Defeating fascism was a shared human victory. However, the crucial promises of justice, recognition, and remembrance have yet to be fulfilled."

After World War II, China emerged as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and an independent power, helping to shape the post-war world. As China prepares to celebrate the victory again in September, the memory of the war has been revitalized.

Su Yuankui, who is also the vice president of the Chinese Academy of History of Chinese Resistance against Japanese Aggression, said, "Remembering doesn't just mean remembering the past. For a country like ours, it means gaining strength to face the future."