

Ancient Chinese Political, Strategic, and Historiographical Thought in the Second Sino-Japanese War China: The Analects, Zhouyi, and Shiji in the War of Resistance (1937–1945)

Zichen Xu *

School of HCA, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

* Corresponding Author Email: Z.Xu-93@sms.ed.ac.uk

Abstract. The traditional Chinese classics of Confucianism established the distinctive cultural characteristics which define the Chinese people. The tradition evolved into a moral system which extended beyond written text to influence Chinese cultural values and concepts. Confucianism established itself as a fundamental element of Chinese national heritage through its extensive historical development. These principles from Confucianism shaped numerous policy choices and propaganda initiatives during World War II. These measures had a profound and positive impact on fostering a nationwide attitude and strategy of active resistance in Chinese society at that time. The Chinese classics *The Analects*, *The Book of Changes* and *The Records of the Grand Historian* transmitted their principles through time to become permanent representations of Chinese heritage. The Confucian classics, as a part of China's cultural memory, have become a spiritual and cultural symbol for the Chinese people. They embody the national spirit, facilitate political mobilization. This essay investigates how national memories created cultural ideals that positively influenced Chinese social mobilization and state development during the war period.

Keywords: National Identity; cultural memory; wartime mobilization.

1. Introduction

The traditional Chinese classics of Confucianism established the distinctive cultural characteristics which define the Chinese people. The tradition evolved into a moral system which extended beyond written text to influence Chinese cultural values and concepts. The Second Sino-Japanese War saw wartime propaganda and mobilization efforts which drew power from the enduring cultural values that Chinese classical thought had developed throughout history. The cultural expressions emerged organically from identification rather than any deliberate attempt to restore Confucian orthodoxy. Political language achieved deep emotional resonance through traditional ideas which have been transmitted across generations because it effectively promoted unity. The extensive distribution of “*The Analects of Confucius*” and “*The Records of the Grand Historian*” and “*The Book of Changes*” demonstrates their enduring symbolic value as Chinese identity markers rather than their historical significance. The propaganda efforts of wartime achieved greater effectiveness through their connection to deeply embedded cultural structures, which united soldiers and civilians under a shared moral objective. As historian Hans J. van de Ven observed about the New Life Movement in the 20th century, seeking to promote a secular and rationalized version of Confucian ethics, presenting it as compatible with modernity, and as the foundation of a common national identity and cultural life [1]. His viewpoint indicates the dependence of Confucian values, suggesting that this ideal has been deeply internalized in Chinese society. This explains why many the propaganda that conform to these values were very common and effective during the Japanese invasion. Therefore, the culture contained in traditional Chinese works has become a spiritual and cultural symbol for the Chinese people, embodying the national spirit, facilitating political mobilization, and strengthening national identity. This essay aims to explore how the cultural ideals brought about by such national memories have had a positive impact and shaped the social mobilization and state construction of modern China during the war.

2. Background

The moral ideals and unique values passed down from ancient times in China have been internalized by the Chinese people as principles for viewing crises and responsibilities in the modern society in the 20th century. The philosophical thoughts in *The Analects of Confucius* teach people to abide by benevolence and righteousness in their actions and thoughts. The famous people oriented aspect of it has enabled people to uphold the beliefs and virtues of loyalty, kindness and responsibility towards people and cultural communities. The work *The Book of Changes* embodies this concept of persistence and transformation, which is that hardship can be endured and ultimately people can overcome difficulties. It encourages people to confront difficulties in order to achieve renewal through endurance in the cosmic cycle. Many of the heroic figures in *Records of the Grand Historian* made corresponding personal sacrifices for loyalty and sacrifice, and the book praises these characters' stories in order to reinforce these ideals. These admirable historical memories thus influence readers to regard the memories of these remarkable figures as their moral guide. These classic works, through education and rituals over several centuries, have been disseminated among the masses, so that these values no longer remain as mere philosophical thoughts but have become the memory and instinct of Chinese society.

Even in the 20th century when the New Culture Movement emerged, this set of values still persisted. As historian Xu Fuguan pointed out, even though various literary masters of that era and the rise of the New Culture Movement Deprived Confucianism of its sole dominant position, it still could not change its influence in people's hearts [2,3]. This demonstrates that even in the face of criticism, Confucian values have persisted as the cornerstone of culture. Furthermore, as the renowned figure Liang Qichao said at that time, democracy has always been a part of China's heritage since ancient times [4]. This also indicates that even though political leaders introduced new ideas, Confucianism was still regarded as an integral part of the national spirit and was used to provide legitimacy for the new political concepts of the era. Historian Joseph Levenson's research on this period of Chinese history also indicates that although Confucianism lost its political authority, it still persisted as a culture that was oriented towards people's legitimacy and sense of responsibility [5]. This further demonstrates that the social functions of Confucianism have transcended political governance and have become a cultural force that sustains social identity and behavioral norms. From this, it can be seen that in the midst of criticism and turmoil, the core values of the essence have continued to exist and even become more prominent, while the dross has gradually been forgotten. This observation by Confucianism helps explain why during the War of Resistance, the calls for loyalty and righteousness were able to go beyond mere political propaganda: they were not slogans that the mobilized people heard as unfamiliar, but rather beliefs deeply rooted in the people's daily values. At that time, why China was able to mobilize through corresponding slogans played a very significant role. The new ideology activated the values that were already "embedded in the people's hearts" and was in line with the moral principles of the Chinese people. This foundation was crucial for understanding how propaganda could transform sacrifices into righteous responsibilities, and why the invocation of classical ideals gave war a deeper legitimacy.

One of the reasons why Confucian values resonated so strongly during the Second Sino-Japanese War was the appropriation of them in propaganda, which drew on principles that ordinary people already regarded as part of their moral world [6]. This maxim has long shaped the Chinese people's understanding of orthodoxy. By the 1930s, this principle was no longer just a distant philosophical saying; it had become a belief deeply rooted in social expectations. Chinese people believed that the strength and survival of the country depended on their own participation. When the mobilization campaigns invoke this idea, it doesn't sound like a new demand; rather, it seems like a confirmation of old facts. At that time, just as Chiang Kai-shek's intention was, in his Lushan Declaration, he said that if there was no room left at the end, then the will of the vast majority of the people throughout the country would have to be mobilized to contend with external forces [7]. Here, it is emphasized that the war of resistance was not the decision of a few leaders alone, but the "will of the vast majority of the people" across the country. This is highly consistent with the traditional people-oriented

ideology of China. By justifying the war as “a common choice of the entire people”, the government not only established political legitimacy through public opinion but also transformed the concept of people oriented governance into a powerful mobilization discourse, making it easier for the citizens to accept the call to fight for the survival of the nation. The Communist Party also mentioned in the *Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei Daily* that they should attach importance to the great power of the masses; to defeat the Japanese Empire at that time, it was necessary to go deep among the masses and understand their interests [8]. This indicates that not only the Nationalist Party at that time, but also the Communist Party during the war also took into account the interests of the people at that time, thereby further promoting the concept of people oriented propaganda and enabling the War of Resistance against Japan to become a national war. Historian Lin Hong’s view shows that during the Anti-Japanese War period, Confucian concepts such as “people oriented” were not merely ethical discourse but were effectively transformed into tools for mobilizing the nation [9]. Confucian thought provided legitimacy for the government, unified values and sacrifice narratives, consolidated public and military morale, and enhanced the efficiency of raising funds, recruiting troops, and conducting long-term resistance. This work holds that Confucian values did not fade away in modern times; instead, they were embedded in the daily life of society through a moral framework of people-oriented governance - collective responsibility - and national community. The reason why China was able to quickly integrate social will during the war was not due to a single new discourse, but rather in transforming the loyalty and responsibility of the people that had been deeply rooted into the national mobilization capacity. Therefore, the effectiveness of national mobilization during the war was closely related to the connection from tradition to modernity. Taking specific propaganda slogans and the practical actions of the masses as examples, it demonstrates how this ideology was transformed into mobilization at the execution level.

The situation where such values as mentioned in this article were used for propaganda and mobilization was not only reflected in the concept of “The Analects”, but also in “Records of the Grand Historian”, where the values of sacrifice and heroism were highly similar to those promoted at that time. This empathy became a widely recognized role model image, and this cultural memory was quickly activated in the propaganda of the War of Resistance, facilitating emotional resonance and organized actions in Chinese society. *The Records of the Grand Historian* by Sima Qian records many historical figures. Among them, the “Assassins” chapter in the Records of the Grand Historian embodies the principle of sacrificing one's life for righteousness. This is manifested in the lines “Cold blows the wind by the Yi River; once the hero sets forth, he shall never come back.” and “The knight dies for the one who knows him.”, where four assassins fulfilled their patriotism and their moral principles, and sacrificed their names [10]. These sentences regard sacrifice as a moral choice and ultimate commitment, which is highly consistent with the solemn and tragic rituals written by the martyrs at that time and justifies the act of sacrificing one's life in return for righteousness. It is also very in line with the discourse ethics of “for the country and for the people” during the war. From the propaganda about the anti-Japanese heroes at that time, one can find many similarities in the expressions of the same kind of determination. For instance, during the period of the Republic of China, the heroic story of the 800 soldiers defending the Four-Warehouse in Shanghai was reported in the Peking Daily in 1937 [11]. The story described that “The 800 soldiers fought to the death, and thousands of citizens came to offer their condolences.” This kind of reporting focuses on narrating the deeds of those who adhered to orders and received rewards. Such sacrifices are justified as heroic models, which are similar to the underlying philosophy of historical records. Zhou Enlai of the Communist Party described the sacrifice of General Zuo Quan as the highest honor of “dying for the country with one’s life, spilling one’s last drop of blood,” noting that since Zuo Quan joined the military at Huangpu he “had never left the army for a single day,” and that his sacrifice was defined as “the glory of revolutionary soldiers” and “a model for the Party”. Its “companion” has evolved from individual monarchs to a comprehensive entity consisting of the state, the people, and political parties, and has been dedicated to ensuring the accuracy and timely notification of one’s destiny until

death. This classical paradigm was modernized in wartime discourse as “death for the country”, completing the semantic transition from private virtue and gratitude to public sacrifice.

3. Discussion

People's Daily reported that after the war, the rear area's Chinese army recruited nearly 260,000 soldiers from 1937 to 1945 [12]. With such a large number of soldiers, they replenished the troops on the front lines. It can be seen that the propaganda at that time actually played a considerable role. Zhu Xiaofang and Huang Shunliang, studying from the perspective of female students, examined the mobilization for the exhibition and wartime propaganda, which led to spontaneous fundraising, relief efforts, and choir activities by female students on the streets that rapidly emerged in the city and created an atmosphere of mass participation driven by emotions [13]. It can be seen that the effectiveness of the anti-Japanese campaign lies in the fact that these propaganda efforts successfully awakened the deep-seated values within the Chinese people's hearts, thereby instilling in them a greater sense of passion for mobilization. From the heroic model in “Records of the Grand Historian” to the wartime narrative of martyrs, both share the evaluation system of “a brave man gone forever”, which is a set of values that have been deeply ingrained as daily ethics and collective memory. Therefore, newspaper obituaries, urban reports, and visual narratives do not create new doctrines, but rather awaken and organize existing consensus, enabling emotions to quickly transform into visible actions such as spontaneous fundraising, consolation, and public ceremonies. In other words, the effectiveness of propaganda comes from the correct internalization of ideological concepts within Confucianism, achieving a closed loop for the anti-Japanese mobilization, rather than the transplantation of external ideas.

These policies related to Confucianism, which were formulated, not only shaped the concepts at the grassroots level, but also demonstrated that the upper echelons of the government and the grassroots people shared the same determination and values, which were reflected in the strategic expressions and governance orientations during the war. Among *The book of Change* “When pressed to extremity, transformation follows; transformation brings about unimpeded progress; and progress ensures continuity.” [14]. This statement implies that the idea of responding promptly when encountering difficulties, enabling the smooth flow of resources and people's will, and achieving smoothness so as to sustain over the long term, can be presented as a universally accepted causal chain. This causal reasoning shares similar philosophical concepts, clear value bases and legitimacy with the ideas and tactics of the Mao Zedong's “*On Protracted War*” during that period, as well as the overall and all-out war strategies. In the discussion of protracted war, the three main strategic phases - strategic defense, strategic stalemate, and strategic counteroffensive - were mentioned [15]. Transforming the flexible mobile defense capability of “When in trouble, change” into an elastic one, and the continuous warfare causing the Japanese to lack resources and being trapped in the vast ocean of people's war is in line with this concept. This concept is also similar to “When changing, it becomes possible; when possible, it lasts long”. This similarity is not fabricated out of thin air; it is precisely how ancient Chinese philosophy has transformed into the action language at the modern national level. As historian Rana Mitter pointed out, he agreed with the assessment made by Mao Zedong, the leader of the Communist Party at that time, that the ‘quick victory’ judgment after the Xuzhou battle had failed and the war had entered a long-term, nationwide phase of attrition [16]. This assessment was regarded as a decision at that time. This is in line with the causal chain of “When pressed to extremity, transformation follows; transformation brings about unimpeded progress; and progress ensures continuity.” Thus, the “protracted war” strategy proposed by the upper echelons was more likely to gain social value recognition and be transformed into practical actions. For instance, the extensive guerrilla warfare carried out nationwide at that time was a concrete manifestation of avoiding the enemy's offensive and engaging in protracted combat. The *Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei Daily* and the records of the Communist Party of China vividly demonstrated that the guerrilla warfare at that time was a manifestation of a protracted war, and Japan was unable to bear the disturbance [17].

Therefore, this article holds that the reason why the upper echelons judged that “the protracted war” was feasible and institutionalized it in “On Protracted War” lies not in the rhetoric, but in its alignment with the strategic wisdom of traditional Chinese culture, namely “when things reach a dead end, change is necessary; change leads to communication; and communication leads to longevity”, adapting to difficult situations through flexibility, achieving communication through mobilization, and supporting the protracted war through communication. Thus, it not only conforms to traditional cognition but also has social acceptability and feasibility. When the “change - communication - longevity” logic of traditional Chinese culture in *The Book of Changes* resonates with the strategic thinking of the upper echelons, the propaganda can smoothly follow the existing cultural channels and stabilize the “determination” into favorable strategic philosophy and instructions during the war.

In conclusion, the excellent values and philosophical thoughts contained in ancient Chinese Confucianism are not merely cultural heritage. They have become recognized moral standards in that society, and thus these moral standards can play a very crucial and outstanding role in the war. Therefore, whether in grassroots propaganda or in matters at the top level, they can resonate with traditional Chinese culture, enabling loyalty, sacrifice, and persistent resistance to gain widespread recognition and execution. From the people-oriented thought in *The Analects*, the act of sacrificing oneself for righteousness in *Records of the Grand Historian*, to the flexible concepts in *the book of change* tactics. These traditional Chinese academic concepts were reactivated during the war and combined with more modern ideological concepts, transforming into a common language for uniting the national spirit and conducting a long-term resistance. This indicates that the victory of the war was due to the long-term accumulation and dissemination of cultural consensus in China. Thus, it became an important ideological resource for building the country in the face of huge crises and also revealed the deep reason why China could achieve national unity during the period of national survival.

4. Conclusion

This article examines the process by which *The Analects of Confucius*, *The Book of Changes*, and *The Records of the Grand Historian* were reinterpreted and mobilized during the period of the Chinese War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. It reveals how traditional Confucian thought was transformed into cultural resources for political legitimacy, strategic thinking, and social mobilization. These classics not only served as “spiritual ammunition” during the war but also shaped cultural nationalism with lasting influence in times of national crisis. At the same time, this article has certain limitations: due to space constraints and limitations in accessing materials, the main materials focus on national-level propaganda and elite discourse, and there is insufficient coverage of county-level newspapers, local association archives, and the acceptance levels of grassroots people. Future research could combine local historical materials and oral accounts to present a more comprehensive interaction between “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches, thereby deepening the understanding of the mechanisms of thought dissemination and mobilization during the war. More importantly, the role of female groups during the war, local clan networks, and marginalized regions in the dissemination of Confucian thought during the Second Sino-Japanese War has not been fully recognized. These relatively unexplored areas may provide new entry points and interdisciplinary expansion spaces for future research.

References

- [1] Van de Ven H. War and Nationalism in China: 1925–1945. London: Routledge, 2003, 165–170.
- [2] Xu F. An Example of Confucianism’s Influence on Chinese History. In *Between Scholarship and Politics*. Taipei: Taiwan Student Book Co., 1985, 385.
- [3] Xu F. The Uniqueness and Advancement of Confucian Political Thought. In *Between Scholarship and Politics*. Taipei: Taiwan Student Book Co., 1985, 52–54.

- [4] Liang Q. History of Pre-Qin Political Thought, in *The Complete Works of Yinbingshi*, vol. 9, Special Collection X. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Co., 2004–2005, 79–80.
- [5] Levenson J. R. *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968.
- [6] Confucius. *The Analects*. Tianjin: Tianjin Education Press, 2014, 295–299.
- [7] Chiang K. The Lushan Address. *China Digital Times*, Jul. 8, 2012. Available: <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2012/07/jiang-jieshi-lushan-speech-full-text>
- [8] Zhang J. A Study of Editorials in the Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei Daily during the Period of the All-out War of Resistance (1937–1945). Ph.D. dissertation, School of Journalism and Communication, Hebei Univ., Hebei, China, Nov. 2022, 139.
- [9] Lin H. On the Modern Transformation of the People-Oriented Principle. *Observation and Ponderation*, no. 5, 37–39, May 2015.
- [10] Sima Q. *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*. Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Books Publishing House, 1994, 753–760.
- [11] Ma H. The “800 Heroes.” *Ta Kung Pao*, Aug. 29, 1937, reprinted in *Takungpao.com*, Aug. 27, 2020.
- [12] Heng Y. The Sacrifice and Contribution of Sichuan Troops in the War of Resistance against Japan. *People’s Daily Online – China Communist Party News Network*, Oct. 15, 2014.
- [13] Zhu X., Huang S. Patriotic Propaganda and Mobilization of Female Students in the Early Stage of the All-out War of Resistance: An Investigation Based on Republican Periodicals (1937–1939). *Fujian Forum: Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2019, 6, 113–119.
- [14] Liu J. *Detailed Explanation of the Book of Changes: The Xici Commentary*. Beijing: New Star Press, 2011, 125.
- [15] Mao Z. *On Protracted War*. Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1952, 29–33.
- [16] Mitter R. *China’s War with Japan, 1937–1945: The Struggle for Survival*. London: Penguin Books, 2014, 153–154.
- [17] Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei Daily Historical Research Society. *Selected Editorials of the Jinchaji Daily, 1937–1948*. Shijiazhuang: Hebei People’s Publishing House, 1997, 3.