Reflections on Visiting a Chinese War Museum

Since starting classes at MIIS, I’ve been to China twice, Japan twice – including an exchange semester at Tokyo’s Waseda University currently underway – and had the opportunity to spend two months working at an international relations think tank in South Korea. This might sound like bragging, and in a sense, it is: these experiences all came about through connections and support from my professors at MIIS as well as generous funding opportunities for travel abroad provided by the Institute. MIIS is an awesome place to study if you’re looking for chances to travel, research, or work abroad and get something meaningful out of it.

Most recently, this May and June I went on a research practicum to China with about 20 classmates and professors from both MIIS and Middlebury College. Our professors had arranged for us to visit some of China’s top universities in Beijing, the headquarters of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Shanghai Stock Exchange, and the vertigo-inducing 65th-floor offices of a Shanghai venture capital firm. We met with, among others, some of China’s leading university teachers and researchers, the director of an NGO incubator, an environmental activist, officials running and planning one of the country’s most profitable and fastest-modernizing industrial parks, and the manager of an internationally operating SOE – an amazing list of speakers and interviewees to help us understand some of the tectonic political and economic reforms as well as the bottom-up, entrepreneurial social initiatives that are propelling Chinese government, business, and society into the 21st century. Rather than rehash those discussions, though, I’d like to write about a different experience – one that, for me, spoke more directly to the value of traveling, of spending money and time, risking digestive and linguistic disaster just to physically be in a different, distant place with its own distinct history and culture.

I would bet that outside of East Asia, the Marco Polo Bridge is little known or thought of except by history buffs or East Asia specialists. Completed in 1192 under the Jin Dynasty to bolster southern transportation lines to and from the new capital at Beijing, the bridge’s actual name is Lugouqiao (卢沟桥) – roughly “black ditch bridge” – after the impenetrably murky waters of the Yongding River over which it was built. Sometime around 1300, the Italian romance writer Rustichello da Pisa published his Livres des Merveilles du Monde (Book of the Marvels of the World), more commonly titled in English as The Travels of Marco Polo. Among the wonders Polo described to Pisa during their time together in a Genoan prison were the architectural beauty and flawless engineering of the century-old Lugou Bridge. In European – and later American – histories, textbooks, and travel guides ever since, the bridge has taken the name of the first westerner to catalogue its existence.

The bridge is famous in China for another reason, one that is integral to the creation story of the modern Chinese state. World War II began for China not in 1941 or ’39, but in 1937 when a confrontation on the outskirts of Beijing between Imperial Japanese troops and a Chinese garrison stationed in the small fortress town of Wanping quickly mushroomed into a full-scale Japanese invasion. After ruthlessly suppressing the anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion in 1901 and subsequently sacking much of Beijing, the Eight-Nation Alliance – a coalition of colonial powers with economic and territorial interests in China – imposed a set of protocols on the faltering Qing government that included stationing their own troops on Chinese soil to guard imperial
possessions. Japan did exactly this, and in 1937 had thousands of troops stationed along a network of railway holdings in Korea, Manchuria, and eastern China. During exercises on the night of July 7, Japanese troops assigned to protect Fengtai junction, east and slightly to the south of Lugou Bridge, demanded entrance to Wanping to search for a soldier who had gone missing after shots were fired during the maneuvers. Wanping’s mayor refused. Tensions rose throughout the night, and Japanese forces surrounded Wanping the next day. Gunfire and shelling broke out on the afternoon of July 8. Heavily outnumbered Chinese troops held the bridge, a point of direct access to Wanping’s western gate, but only at the cost of devastating casualties. Later historical investigation has revealed that the missing soldier, Private Shimura Kikujiro, had in fact gotten lost while going to the bathroom. He soon cleared up his whereabouts by reporting back to his garrison, but, tragically, not in time to arrest the violent spiral of nationalism and bloodshed that he had unwittingly set in motion.

Much of this history, and that of the war that followed, is on display in the nearby Museum of the War of the Chinese People’s Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, opened in 1987 on the 50th anniversary of the war’s beginning. The day on which I visit is gray and drizzling, appropriately glum weather for the occasion. Somber-looking clouds and the threat of rain seem to have kept most people inside who don’t have a compelling reason to be out on a weekend morning, leaving the subway atypically empty and quiet. After I get off at the nearest bus stop, I still have to round the outer wall of Wanping to make my way to the east entrance, where signs for the museum point me down a wide stone-paved street lined with leafy Chinese elms, short gray brick buildings trimmed with painted red lattice and shutters, umbrella-covered cold noodle carts, empty restaurants waiting for lunch customers in another hour or two, kitschy souvenir shops stocked with toy guns and colorful plastic knickknacks, and information kiosks. The weather isn’t severe, just dreary, so I’m joined by a few fellow sightseers – families and couples making a Sunday pilgrimage to relive the violence, struggle, and victory that is the foundation of their country as it stands today.

Notwithstanding China’s reputation for fostering anti-Japanese nationalism – online shooter games based on the War of Resistance and even on contemporary conflict scenarios have garnered much attention in recent years – the museum strikes me as mostly preoccupied with being pro-Chinese. Placards and labels throughout the exhibit repeatedly highlight China’s important contributions to the “World Anti-Fascist War,” pointing out that China’s struggle against Japanese imperialism and expansion dates back to the Manchurian Incident in 1931, eight years before the outbreak of war in Europe and 10 years before America entered the war. Numerous photographs, models, and explanations detail the tactical innovations and material contributions of different Chinese regions and ethnicities, pointedly including controversial areas like Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Tibet in a spontaneous “Nationwide Anti-Japanese Campaign.” Several displays at the end of the walkthrough feature postwar Japanese acts of friendship and penitence from civil society groups, former war criminals, and politicians. Another sign pronounces hopefully that “Peace and friendship are the main themes of the Sino-Japanese relationship,” but also denounces the revisionism of “Japanese right-wing forces” as a threat to the international post-World War II legacy of peace and progress. A nearby display shows the cover of a Japanese history textbook that omits Japan’s misconduct in the war, photographs of Chinese protestors rallying against Japan’s nationalization of the Diaoyu Islands in 2012, and photographs of Japanese protestors rallying against the revision of Article 9 of Japan’s pacifist constitution.
This is not to say that Imperial Japan’s colonial rapine and abuse go unmentioned. A special room is dedicated to the thousands of Chinese laborers conscripted and worked to death in Japanese coal mines and other wartime industrial projects. For a moment, it’s as though I’ve stepped out of the Museum of Resistance and into an exhibit about The Holocaust. Mournful violin music played from overhead speakers sets the mood for photographs of men and women emaciated by starvation rations and forced hard labor. Quotations printed on the walls admonish museum-goers to heed the lessons of “one of the darkest periods in all of human history.” On the floor, glass cases house bones and skulls recovered from mass graves. People crowd and crane their necks around a gruesomely fascinating, medieval-looking torture device: a rotating wire cocoon lined with nails for especially unlucky prisoners. The effect becomes complete when I realize that the music I’m hearing is actually the theme from Schindler’s List, that hauntingly beautiful meme of musical sadness that I first heard in high school when my entire freshman class watched the movie together in a rented theater.

As a paradigm of political evil, The Holocaust offers a fitting analogy: Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany are both perennial topics in politics and education, raised as cautionary tales against the dangers of nationalism, racism, fascism, and soft-handed diplomacy in the face of aggression. But China’s War of Resistance is much more than that. During a period of ceaseless military conflict and economic chaos from 1937 – or 1931, by some accounts – until the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, China weathered a vicious imperial invasion, ousted colonial foreign powers from its territory for the first time in 100 years, and fought a protracted ideological civil war that to this day has not been officially settled. The American Revolution, Civil War, and World War II combined might begin to approximate how central this period of strife and violence is to the history and identity of the Chinese state today. The Rape of Nanjing, the most well-known event of the War of Resistance outside China and the only one I learned about in high school, highlights the moral depravity of Imperial Japan’s ultra-nationalist military, but it doesn’t touch on the political significance of China’s eventual victory and the ascendance of the Communist Party during this time.

When non-Chinese Americans do encounter other pieces of this history, it is most often refracted through our own families, experiences, and circumstances. While out to buy a Christmas tree one year, my dad, brother, and I stopped at a roadside farm store whose owner’s uncle or father – I don’t remember which – had been a member of the Flying Tigers, a squadron of US fighter pilots contracted by Chiang Kai Shek and stationed in southern China early in the Pacific War to fly missions against Japan. Although well-intentioned and still appreciated in China today, the Flying Tigers were also part of an ultimately futile stream of financial and materiel support to Chiang, much of which he surreptitiously diverted for use against his communist rivals rather than the Japanese. The store – Taft Farms – was the go-to stop for tangleberry, peach, and cherry pies during my childhood, and also sells typical American and New England comfort food like frozen trays of homemade mac and cheese, chicken pot pies, apple cider donuts, and local apple cider. Less than 10 minutes to the north is Stockbridge, Massachusetts, the home and environs of Norman Rockwell and subject of his iconic “Stockbridge Main Street at Christmas” – quite literally the archetypal American small town. After picking out a tree, getting it bundled up, and lashing it to the roof of our station wagon, the three of us stood shuffling our feet in the freezing December night while a gray-haired New England farmer told us, with tears in his eyes, about a miraculous supply drop that managed to get a bottle of whiskey to the Flying Tigers just in time for Christmas. I might have forgotten the
story if not for the weird sense of incongruity I felt at how easily and unironically this sliver of complex US-Chinese history had been morphed into Americana.

I think every family is touched in some way by the legacy of war. Members on both sides of my family fought against Japan as Marines in the Pacific War. One came home with a *senninbari*, a head- or waistband embroidered one stitch at a time by the women in Japanese soldiers’ neighborhoods when they were called to duty. The other brought home an Imperial Japanese flag signed with military slogans and a soldier’s name, rank, and hometown. I never had the wherewithal to ask exactly how my relatives came to possess these items – the answer seemed so disturbingly obvious that I felt there was no need. I also discovered recently that my maternal grandfather, who joined the Navy immediately after graduating high school, had been in London during V-2 rocket bombardments. Considering that we had actually traveled to London together, I was surprised this had never come up, but quickly understood why he was reluctant to talk about it. Sitting around the dinner table, we listened as he recalled and imitated the incoming whistle and detonation of the rockets, something he must have heard over and over again, wondering each time if he was about to be annihilated.

At the museum in Beijing, I watch a boy strike a military pose – hands clasped at the small of his back, chest out, face inscrutable – in front of a display case of rifles used in the war. His mother takes the picture. Next to her is an elderly man, I assume the grandfather, in what looks like a military uniform. How do they talk about the war, I wonder? With pride? Regret? Disinterest? Some elderly Chinese people remain scarred by memories of Imperial Japanese atrocities, but younger generations, like the rest of the world, have developed a fondness for Japanese technology and popular culture. How do the generations of this family, like mine, struggle to reconcile their discrepant experiences of history? What memories are passed down and remembered, and what hidden traumas are left unmentioned, to be forgotten?

It’s a short walk from the museum to Lugou Bridge, immediately across the street from Wanping’s arched western gate. Most of the river water has either dried up or been diverted, so underneath the bridge is a reed-covered marsh rather than flowing water. Newer, bigger railway and traffic bridges are visible nearby on either side, obscured by power and phone lines strung across the riverbed. It’s hard to avoid the impression that the bridge, neither functionally necessary nor physically imposing, is being swallowed up by the city developing around it. But, standing here, it’s also hard not to think about the bloody history to which it bears witness. Right here, simmering nationalism erupted into bloody war. Bullets and artillery cut through the air, maybe where I’m standing now, fired in anger over what could have been, if things had gone differently, just a comical misunderstanding over a bathroom break. The unchanged quaintness of Lugou Bridge compared to the blistering pace of change and modernization in the rest of Beijing is a stark reminder that tragedy often has humble beginnings. Calamity can, and often has, been the result of would-be trivial misunderstandings compounded by breakdowns in communication. As China and the United States hurtle into the future, leading the world on an ever-accelerating trajectory of technological and economic development, it’s worth standing here and taking note of the very human factors that can both cause and prevent disaster. The more clearly we understand each other, the more likely we’ll be able to avoid such disaster. I’ll never be able to stand in the shoes of the soldiers who fought and died here, but we’d better understand what that fighting means to their country now if we want to avoid more of it in the future.