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Does History Education Promote Nationalism in China? A ‘Limited Effect’ Explanation

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ABSTRACT
Most studies of Chinese nationalism are based on an unstated and unexamined assumption that history education in Chinese schools can effectively instill the official memory of the anti-Japanese war into students. This article tests this assumption through a multi-method study based on a survey, a textual analysis and qualitative interviews with high school students and teachers. The findings show that history education (including both in-class and extracurricular forms) has limited effects on nationalism among Chinese high school students. The in-class textbook education is largely ineffective in forging nationalistic sentiments among students, whereas some extracurricular activities, such as visiting the ‘patriotic education bases’, have limited effects. The limited effects can be explained by four factors: (1) changes in the content and form of the new history textbooks; (2) the students’ and teachers’ actual uses of the textbooks; (3) the students’ cognitive and emotional agency in receiving history education; and (4) alternative information sources such as the media and family memory. This study contributes to the understanding of Chinese nationalism and historical memory by emphasizing the complexity involved in receiving official narratives.

History education has been central to the ‘history war’ between Japan and the Asian countries that Japan invaded during World War II. In April 2005, at the height of China’s nationwide protests against Japan’s effort to gain a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council, Japan’s Foreign Minister Machimura Nobutaka accused the Chinese government of inculcating a distorted image of Japan and an ideology-loaded historical narrative of the Sino–Japanese War (1937–1945) in the Chinese youth. His comments implied a direct causal relationship between history education in Chinese schools and nationalistic sentiments toward Japan in particular and Chinese nationalism in general. Machimura’s accusation was a reaction to China’s and Korea’s condemnation of the Japanese government’s approval of the history textbooks that deny or euphemize Japan’s atrocities during WWII, such as the Nanjing Massacre and the ‘Comfort Women’ issue.

Some scholarly studies echo this narrative. A prevailing argument is that the Chinese state uses various strategies, including history education, to purposefully indoctrinate the youth into nationalistic sentiments. For example, Yinan He argues that ‘the visceral nationalistic sentiment has deep roots in the decades of centralized school education and official propaganda in China that implanted pernicious myths in the national collective memory.’1 The Chinese government launched a ‘Patriotic Education Campaign’ in the early 1990s to deal with the vacuum of the belief after the 1989 Tiananmen Movement, using

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nationalism to replace class-struggle narratives in history textbooks, establishing ‘patriotic education bases’ and utilizing multiple cultural resources to enhance the regime’s legitimacy. Invoking historical memory of the ‘national humiliation’, the Chinese state also uses nationalism and historical issues as bargaining chips for diplomatic negotiations. The state’s purposeful construction of memory strikes a chord with at least part of the population, due to the traumatic memories since the nineteenth century. This effort, according to some studies, has led to fairly successful outcomes. For example, those who grew up in and after the 1990s became the major participants of a few high-profile anti-foreign-country protests, including the 1999 anti-US protests and two anti-Japan protests in 2005 and 2012.

Nevertheless, many of the studies are based on an unstated and unexamined assumption that the history education in schools successfully instills nationalistic sentiments into students. Studies of history education and collective memory in other contexts have already shown limitations of this assumption. For instance, Japan scholar Fukuoka found that ‘how people reflect upon history issues is not necessarily the function of school history textbooks as often assumed’. Other factors, such as the students’ family members and their encounters with Asian others, may have more impact. In studying the collective knowledge of public events of the Soviet era, Schuman and Corning found that although the years of education might immerse the students with more state-approved images, it also nurtures a cognitive sophistication that challenges such images. Consequently, after the fall of the Soviet Union, those with a higher education level tend to remember more of the events suppressed by the former authoritarian regime than less educated members of their generation. Schuman and Corning’s study is of particular importance here because it indicates the limitations of an authoritarian regime’s efforts to impose official memory on its citizens.

If one regards the state-controlled history education as production of historical memory, the students, as consumers, do not necessarily ‘buy’ the product—at least they do not necessarily interpret the memory along the intended line. In the field of Chinese nationalism, a small number of studies take this subtle view and shift their focus from production to ‘reception’—in other words, examining students’ interpretations of the official nationalism and the effects of the interpretations on attitudes toward foreign countries. For example, scholars examine students’ differential reception of patriotism and nationalism, and whether this attitudinal differentiation influences their foreign policy attitudes. Drawing on two surveys conducted in 2000 and 2005 on both Mainland and Hong Kong university students, Fairbrother shows that students are aware of the state’s indoctrination effort and are able to resist such hegemonic intention by practicing critical thinking. Therefore, the students are not passive receivers of the official ideology but active agents who empower themselves by mobilizing available resources and critically analyzing the educational information.

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This study follows this approach but takes a few steps further in empirical scope and methods. First, while the existing studies along this line are more about students’ nationalistic attitudes in general, this study is focused more on history education and its effects on students’ attitudes. Second, the respondents and interviewees in this study are mainly high school students instead of university students. The adolescence is a ‘critical period’ for youth to acquire knowledge of historical events and form worldviews.11 For most Chinese youth, high school years are the last period when they systematically learn history from state-run schools. In this sense, they belong to a new generation who grew up in the late 2000s and differ from those youth on the street in the 2005 anti-Japan protests, who are the major research subjects of previous studies. Third, this study is more interested in how history is actually taught in schools than simply linking official narratives to students’ attitudes. The authors believe that, without knowing the teaching and learning process, studies of patriotic education and memory are still incomplete. Essentially, this study asks: (1) does history education really promote nationalism in China? (2) What factors explain the effects (or lack of effects) of history education?

To unravel these puzzles, the authors conducted a survey of high school students in four Chinese cities and supplemented it with a textual analysis of the history textbook and in-depth interviews with both students and teachers. The findings demonstrate that the Chinese state’s history education (including both in-class and extracurricular forms) has only limited effects on students’ perceptions of historical issues and their nationalistic attitudes. The in-class textbook education is largely ineffective in forging nationalistic sentiments among students, while extracurricular activities, such as visiting the ‘patriotic education bases’, have limited effects. The limited effects can be explained by four factors: (1) changes in the content and form of new high school history textbooks; (2) the students’ and teachers’ actual uses of history textbooks; (3) the students’ cognitive and emotional agencies in receiving the history education; and (4) alternative information sources such as the media and family memory.

Data and Methods

The authors first conducted a survey in 2013 in four Chinese cities with different regional distinctions and historical and political significances: Beijing, Nanjing, Chongqing and Shenzhen. Beijing was chosen for its status as the political center of China. Nanjing was selected mainly because of the Nanjing Massacre, a major event with great historical significance for China–Japan relations. Chongqing and Shenzhen were also chosen because of their prominence in China’s western and southern regions. In each city, the authors chose one elite school and one regular school according to the ranking of the schools in the region, and then randomly chose three classes from each high school.12 To ensure that the results genuinely reflect the students’ opinions, especially considering the sensitivity of the topic, the authors conducted the survey anonymously and the students were not under any monitoring by teachers. In total, the authors distributed 702 questionnaires and received 544 valid responses, after dealing with missing values and invalid questionnaires.13

The authors also conducted in-depth interviews with high school teachers and students in three Chinese cities: Beijing, Nanjing and the Zhebei14 city in Zhejiang. Zhebei is a small city, and it was chosen mainly as a comparison to the two metropolises. The authors selected one school in each city and then used a snowball sampling strategy to recruit interviewees among the students and teachers, including

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12 Since students in elite schools do not necessarily receive more history education, this study does not include the school category as one of the independent variables.
14 The name of this city is modified to ensure anonymity.
20 high school students and six history teachers in total. The authors maximized the interviewees' variations by selecting them according to several dimensions: elite or regular schools; their majors (16 humanities majors and four science majors), grades (17 second-year students and three third-year students)\(^{15}\) and genders (eight males and 12 females).\(^ {16}\) As a supplement to the interviews, the authors also conducted a textual analysis of the history textbook currently used in Chinese high schools.

**Concepts and Hypotheses**

Nationalism is the most important *dependent variable* in this study. However, as Delanty and Kumar mentioned, the meaning of nationalism is ‘fluid’; and the concept can take ‘a wide variety of forms’.\(^ {17}\) Examining from different perspectives, nationalism can be understood as the ‘political and national congruity’,\(^ {18}\) the ideas that engender nation,\(^ {19}\) or ‘a view that one’s country is superior to other countries and that provides for uncritical support of the home country’s actions’.\(^ {20}\) Nationalism can also take a variety of forms, being ‘practical’, ‘liberal’, ‘ethnic’, ‘geopolitik’, ‘banal’\(^ {23}\) or even ‘missionary’.\(^ {24}\) Moreover, scholars have been debating over the distinction between nationalism and patriotism. For instance, Ernest Gellner believes that ‘nationalism is a very distinctive species of patriotism’;\(^ {25}\) and Michael Billig contends that the two cannot be viewed as separate concepts.\(^ {26}\) On the other hand, Walker Conner argues that nationalism and patriotism are indeed separated,\(^ {27}\) which is empirically supported by Elina Sinkkonen’s recent study.\(^ {28}\) As a compromise, Anthony Smith contends that the two concepts have significant overlaps.\(^ {29}\)

The authors believe that nationalism and patriotism are two separate but overlapping concepts. Following Sinkkonen’s conceptualization,\(^ {30}\) nationalism is defined in this article as *uncritical support for home country and exclusive feelings towards other countries*. The ‘support for home country’ overlaps with the meaning of patriotism, while the ‘uncritical’ and ‘exclusive feelings’ serve as the defining difference.

The authors operationalize the concept into an index of nationalism by calculating the mean score (students’ evaluations) of three statements: ‘My patriotic sentiment is stronger (weaker) than others’ (0 stands for the ‘weakest’ while 6 stands for the ‘strongest’); ‘We should promote/nurture the patriotic sentiments among Chinese’ (0 stands for ‘strongly disagree’ while 6 stands for ‘strongly agree’); and ‘There are so many criticisms on China in the world. We as Chinese citizens should fight back’ (0 stands for ‘strongly disagree’ while 6 stands for ‘strongly agree’). The first two questions are used to evaluate the patriotic aspects of the definition, while the third one explicitly evaluates the exclusive feelings towards other countries.\(^ {31}\)

The authors also include impressions of Japan as another *dependent variable*, because of the central role of wars against Japan in China’s historical memory and nationalism. In the questionnaire, this

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\(^{15}\)Since the first-year students have not declared their majors, this study mainly chose the second and third years.

\(^{16}\)To protect their privacy, this study replaced the real names with codes such as NJS001.


\(^{19}\)Ibid.


\(^{26}\)Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.


\(^{28}\)See note 20.


\(^{30}\)See note 20.

\(^{31}\)The authors borrow some of the statements from Kazuya Fukuoka’s study of Japan youth’s nationalism, with Dr Fukuoka’s permission, and make some revisions in accordance with the Chinese context. See Fukuoka ‘School history textbooks and historical memories in Japan’. The Cronbach’s Alpha is 0.59.
dependent variable was examined by directly asking students to evaluate their impressions of Japan. 0 stands for 'very bad' while 9 means 'very good'.

The independent variables include grade (years of education in the high school), major (humanities or science major /人文或理科), attendance at the ‘patriotic education’ activities, and political background (membership of CCP [Chinese Communist Party] or CYL [Communist Youth League]). If one accepts the assumption that history education is indeed effective in instilling nationalistic sentiments, one should expect that, other things being equal, more exposure to school’s history education will lead to stronger nationalism. In other words, one should expect: (1) more years of education should lead to stronger nationalistic attitudes; (2) students in humanities majors receive more history education than science majors and, therefore, are expected to be more nationalistic; (3) students who attend extracurricular history education activities, such as visits to the ‘patriotic education bases’, are more nationalistic than those who do not; and (4) those seeking the acknowledgement of the regime (namely the CCP or CYL members) are more likely to internalize the official ideology and more likely to be nationalistic. The authors also controlled for the gender effects and explored whether students’ major may interact with gender to influence the dependent variables.

The hypotheses are stated below:

H1: The grade (years of education in high school) is positively related to the nationalistic attitude among high school students.

H2: The humanities majors hold a stronger nationalistic attitude compared with the science majors in the high school.

H3: The frequency of attending ‘patriotic education’ activities is positively related to the nationalistic attitude among high school students.

H4: The CCP/CYL members hold a stronger nationalistic attitude compared with other students in the high school.

By the same token, if one agrees with the prevalent assumption about the effects of history education, one would expect the following outcomes:

H5: The grade (years of education in high school) is negatively related to the impression of Japan among high school students.

H6: The humanities majors hold a more negative impression of Japan compared with the science majors in the high school.

H7: The frequency of attending ‘patriotic education’ activities is negatively related to the impression of Japan among high school students.

H8: The CCP/CYL members hold a more negative impression of Japan compared with other students in the high school.

**Test of The Hypotheses: Does History Education Promote Nationalism in China?**

Table 1 and Figure 1 show the overall level of nationalism. The mean score of the nationalism index is 4.19, higher than average (3), but still significantly lower than the maximum (6). Among the three statements constituting the nationalism index, the exclusive one gets the lowest score, 3.313: whether ‘we should fight back against other countries’ criticism’, which many scholars consider as the differentiating
feature of nationalism as opposed to patriotism. Therefore, although the Chinese high school students have a fairly visible nationalistic sentiment, it is not as strong or extreme as assumed.

Table 2 and Figure 2 also show that students’ impression of Japan is mostly negative. The mean score is 2.898, much lower than the mid-point (4.5). However, this question is more related to students’ emotional reaction to Japan, which is not consistent with cognitive attitudes measured by other questions. For instance, 20.43% of the respondents ‘strongly disagree’ with the statement that ‘Most Japanese are right-wingers who deny the history of invading China,’ and another 31.83% ‘disagree’ with the same statement, making 52.26% of the respondents holding critical tones. This statement explores the very cognitive evaluation of Japan, and thus presents a noticeable contrast to the emotional response to Japan. In other words, although students’ (emotional) impression of Japan is mostly negative, the cognitive evaluation is more nuanced and complicated.

Table 3 shows the results of regression analysis of a variety of education-related factors’ impacts on the attitude and impression.
Table 2. The mean score for each component statement of the nationalism index.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component statements</th>
<th>Mean scores (ranging from 0 to 6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My patriotic sentiment is stronger (or weaker) than others</td>
<td>4.184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should promote/nurture the patriotic sentiments among Chinese</td>
<td>5.074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are so many criticisms on China in the world. We as Chinese citizens should fight back</td>
<td>3.313</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model 1 shows that grade (years of education in the high school) has a negative influence on the nationalistic attitude. For one unit increase of grade, which means one more year of history education, the nationalistic attitude will decrease for 0.414 units, holding other variables constant. This result strongly challenges H1. Model 1 also shows that humanities students’ average nationalism score is not substantially different from the science students. Thus, H2 is also open to question. Moreover, CCP and CYL members do not hold a stronger nationalistic attitude than other students. This result contradicts
H4. The only hypothesis supported by the data is H3. The students who ‘attend patriotic education activities very often’ hold a stronger nationalistic attitude (0.6 more units) compared with other students. Even when controlling for gender and the interaction term between gender and major in Model 2,32 the influence of the key independent variables is not different from those in Model 1.

In sum, the findings show that more years of history education, receiving more history education as humanities majors, and being CCP or CYL members do not lead to stronger nationalistic attitudes among the students. The only exception is ‘attending patriotic education activities’. Thus, it is safe to argue that the history education as a whole has a ‘limited effect’ on students’ nationalistic attitude.

In addition, the authors also examined the effects of history education on students’ impression of Japan. Model 3 shows that grade has a positive relationship to the impression of Japan. For one unit increase of grade, the impression of Japan is significantly better by 1.092 units, holding other variables constant. This result strongly contradicts the prevailing argument in scholarly studies and public opinions that history education in Chinese schools contributes to the negative impression of Japan. Model 3 also shows that a humanities-major student has a better impression of Japan (0.926 units higher), which also contradicts H6.

In contrast to the models with nationalism as the dependent variable, the models with the impression of Japan as the dependent variable suggest slightly stronger support for some of the hypotheses. For example, Model 3 shows that the students who ‘attend patriotic education activities very often’ have a more negative impression towards Japan than other students (0.585 units less). This finding supports H7. The students’ political background seems to have a statistically significant influence on the dependent variable. Model 3 shows that CCP/CYL members have a more negative impression of Japan than other students (0.677 units less). Most of the results remain the same in Model 4 with gender as a control variable except for the variable of major, which loses its statistical significance.

As illustrated above, grade has a negative influence on students’ nationalistic attitudes and a positive relationship to the impression of Japan, while the received wisdom assumes the opposite. One explanation is that, as Schuman and Corning suggest, the years of education do not necessarily mean the acceptance of state-approved knowledge and image; they can also mean the ‘development of a cognitive sophistication that challenges such images’.33 High-grade students will have stronger ability of critical thinking and are more likely to challenge the official discourse.34 By the same token, the humanities majors might explore the history in more depth and thus are more likely to form their own opinions. This cognitive agency explanation is further supported by the interviews, which will be discussed later in this article.

Comparing the models on Japan and those on general nationalism, one difference is the role of political background (CCP/CYL members). Political background does not have a statistically significant influence on the nationalistic attitudes in general, while it does influence the impression of Japan. A possible explanation of this difference might be the tension between the general and the specific. Based on these models, this article tentatively argues that the political background only has an influence on specific targets or events but not on attitudes towards more general phenomena. This might also explain the mixed results regarding this issue in previous studies.35 Yet, this tentative argument should be further tested by future research.

The History Education Reform and Pedagogical Uses of The Textbooks

The survey results show that history education in high schools has only limited effects on students’ nationalistic attitude in general and their views of Japan in particular. The results do not support most

32Since the female students are often regarded as more likely to choose humanities major, this study includes gender and the interaction term to further differentiate the effects between key variables.
34Ibid.
of the hypotheses derived from the assumption of effective history education. The only exception is the extracurricular form of history education, such as 'attending patriotic education activities'.

What can explain this limited and mixed effect? To answer this question, one should start from the textbooks to see if they are what they are said to be. What do the textbooks say about the anti-Japanese war? How much weight does the war-related content carry in education?

Since the new century, Chinese history textbooks have experienced several significant changes as a response to the new circumstances and challenges. The most significant one is the 2003 nationwide textbook reform. The traditional textbook publishers, such as the People's Education Press, lost their monopoly of publishing textbooks and had to compete with other presses for adoption by provincial education bureaus. Meanwhile, there are some major changes in the new textbooks' format and content.

The new textbooks are organized by themes instead of the traditional chronology. The new textbook series consists of three required textbooks and six elective ones. The themes for the required textbook I, II and III, are politics, economy and culture/technology, respectively. The elective textbooks are also organized by themes, such as ‘war and peace in the twentieth century’, ‘reviews of the Chinese and foreign historical figures’, ‘exploring the mystery of history’, and so on. Science students do not need to study the elective courses, while humanities majors must study four of the elective textbooks if they aim for a key university [一类/重点大学] or two for a second-tier university [二类大学].

The new textbooks significantly reduce the amount of content related to wars, and add more content on culture, society and technology. For instance, in the required textbook I (on politics), the content on the anti-Japanese war (1937–1945) is condensed into one section, out of 28 sections, under the topic of ‘modern China fighting for sovereignty’. The section’s breadth and depth are limited. Moreover, according to the students and teachers interviewed, the anti-Japanese war is not a key testing point in the College Entrance Exam today. Thus, the intensive teaching and studying of this theme is further discouraged. In contrast, the content on economy, culture, science and technology is vastly increased.36 In fact, the first sentence of the 2003 Academic Benchmark for High School History Course37 [普通高中历史课程标准] also reflects this trend: ‘in the 21st century, human beings accelerated the steps towards the modern society; science, technology, and cultural thoughts are changing on a daily basis …’. Thus, ‘the basic education reform becomes a global trend’.

These changes result in two important consequences. First, students’ exposure to war-related and ideology-laden content significantly decreases. Second, as many educators complain, the thematic format in the new textbook makes history education in general less effective. This is made worse by the fact that middle school students do not take history courses seriously because the tests are open-book. Therefore, when they enter high school, they are not well prepared for the sophisticated thematic system.

Moreover, the effectiveness is also affected by the way in which teachers use the textbook in their teaching. Many teachers said that they use outside materials from various kinds of media (including TV, magazines and the Internet) as supplements, since ‘students will feel bored if you strictly follow the textbook’ (ZJT001). Also, the teachers will sometimes express their own viewpoints about historical or contemporary issues. For instance, ZJT001 said the following words during the interview:

in fact, Kang Youwei [康有为] and Liang Qichao’s [梁启超] reform, Sun Yat-sen’s [孙中山] revolution, Chen Duxiu [陈独秀], and Li Dazhao [李大钊] all have connections to Japan. Sun Yat-sen’s Tongmenghui [同盟会] was founded in Japan, with the support of some insightful Japanese … However, these contents were not mentioned in the textbook. I will discuss them in class …

In sum, the new history textbooks downplay the content on the anti-Japanese war, while the new format makes history education in general more difficult and less effective. In addition, the teachers’ use of outside sources and expression of own opinions restrain the effectiveness of history education.

36There are still ideological descriptions of Japan in the new textbooks. However, the length and depth of these ideological narratives shrink. Although the 2003 Academic Benchmark still lists ‘promoting patriotism’ as one of its ‘basic ideas’ [基本理念], the importance of this ‘idea’ is not as emphasized as in the Teaching Outlines [教学大纲] for the old textbooks. The 2003 Benchmark also puts more emphasis on ‘cultivation of people’ [提高国民素质] as corresponding to the new era.

37This academic benchmark was published by the People's Education Press in 2003. After 2003, many provinces began to design their own College Entrance Exams and thus used their own ‘teaching instructions’ [教学指导意见]. However, the basic principle is outlined in the 2003 Benchmark.
Students’ Cognitive and Emotional Agency

How are the textbooks and history education actually received by the students? A well-known fact is that students in China and other East Asian countries put more emphasis on studying textbooks for College Entrance Exams than acquiring knowledge.38 The interviews with students corroborate this. The students generally have a pragmatic attitude toward history education and consider the ideological elements as official clichés. ZJS001, a student in Zhejiang, said: ‘We only use the textbook for exams. For many other things, we are more willing to know them through other channels … because the textbook is too official …’. In fact, students all acknowledge that they do not read the textbook very often except for the exam. A student in Nanjing even mentions that the textbook’s only use other than exam is to get a few yuan by recycling it as garbage (NJS002).

More importantly, when students are reading the textbooks, their cognitive and emotional agency enables them to critically receive and even alter the intended meaning of the textbooks. The cognitive layer, or as Schuman and Corning termed as ‘cognitive sophistication’,39 provides students with strong ability of critical thinking and fact-checking.

For instance, ZJS001, a student in Zhejiang, emphasized that the story should be ‘real and logical’ to convince her:

*I will examine different materials, ask other people for their opinions, and put them together (to make my judgement); because you know some things (in the textbook) are false once you read them. So I think the history textbook is kind of cunning, because it will not tell you directly about some sensitive things …*

A similar answer can be found in another interview with NJS004, a second-year humanities student in Nanjing:

*It [the textbook] is fair to the [content related to] ancient times. But for the modern times, I think it kind of avoids things, such as the Kuomintang’s contributions in the war. It sounds like that the Communist Party was leading the nation to beat the Japanese …*

As these quotations illustrate, instead of blindly accepting what the textbook or the teachers tell them as truth, the students possess a cognitive agency that enables them to acquire outside information and form independent thoughts. This agency strongly challenges the effectiveness of the traditional textbook education.

Meanwhile, the emotional layer makes students selectively resonate with the history education, depending on the quality. This is especially evident in the extracurricular form of history education, such as visits to the ‘patriotic education bases’. Students’ trip to the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre serves as a ‘positive case’ representing quality education. NJS001, a student in a Nanjing high school, recalled her experience visiting the Memorial Hall:

*It is very horrifying! Every time I go there, I will be shocked somehow.*

When further asked why she was shocked, she said *after all it is life!* The museum will broadcast some videos. And after watching these videos, I feel so bad and so painful … At that time I feel that Japanese are so evil …: Although NJS001 refers to the humanitarian thinking of life, the emotional agency immersed her into a painful and hateful mood, which bridged the feeling to a nationalist hatred towards Japan.41

A visit to the Pingbei Anti-Japanese War Memorial Hall serves as a ‘negative case’ which represents the poor quality of some ‘patriotic education activities’. BJS001, a student who had just visited the Memorial Hall from Beijing, was not impressed by his trip: ‘There are text descriptions, pictures and real objects from history. But I feel that they are all the same … You will feel bored when you see the repetitions’.

As these cases illustrate, the cognitive and emotional agency together explains the limited effect of history education—which can be summarized into the reception model in Figure 3. The cognitive layer

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38Fukuoka, ‘School history textbooks and historical memories in Japan’, pp. 83–103.
40NJS001 went to the memorial hall many times. The school organized this activity when she was in primary school, but she also went there by herself when she grew older.
41However, NJS001 also admitted that ‘on a second thought later, the feeling is not that strong anymore’, when the cognitive agency took over.
provides students with strong critical thinking ability to check the facts presented in the textbook, while the emotional layer makes students selectively resonate with the (extracurricular) history education depending on the quality.

In addition, the interaction of these two layers of agency also affects students’ attitudes towards Japan. The emotional hatred towards Japan is often interwoven with a positive evaluation of Japan’s achievements, which is illustrated by a particular response pattern emerging from the interviews. When the authors asked students’ overall impression of Japan conveyed by the textbook, they would usually give a negative (emotional) description with laughter, and then cognitively point out the ‘positive side’. For instance, ZJS001 said Japan is definitely an ‘invader’ and ‘despicable’. Then she laughed and said ‘We also learned about the establishment of diplomatic relationship between China and Japan, Japan’s friendly societies, and their help to China’, referring to Japan’s positive image. A similar pattern was also found when interviewing NJS001, who said Japan is ‘heinous’ [‘十恶不赦’], and then cognitively evaluated Japan’s economic developments after WWII. In both cases, the interviewees laughed because they knew that their first response was emotional and not objective. Thus, they added the positive narrative to attenuate their psychological imbalance, which is triggered by the interaction of students’ cognitive and emotional agency. As a result, the students have a rather complicated and sometimes contradictory reading of the image of Japan.

Alternative Sources of Information

Alternative sources of information also explain the limited effect of history education. The interviews show two factors especially important in shaping the nationalistic (or non-nationalistic) attitudes among the high school students: the media and family memory.

Media provide immersed emotional resonance and multiple information channels for critical thinking. NJS001, the Nanjing student quoted earlier, said the following words to describe the degree to which some movies emotionally touch her:

I do watch movies sometimes, for instance the film City of Life and Death [《南京南京》] and The Flowers Of War [《金陵十三钗》] … I cried so much that I almost passed out when I watched the film City of Life and Death.

In this case, the movies immersed this Nanjing girl into a profound sadness which directly or indirectly affects her nationalistic sentiment.

The Chinese state also uses media for its own purpose, but the effectiveness again depends on the quality of the media products. Indeed, many state-sponsored media products fail due to a lack of ‘objectiveness’ and lack of quality. The mainline theme TV show [主旋律电视剧] is an illustrative case. For instance, ZJS001, a student from Zhejiang, said the following words when discussing the issue: ‘I don’t watch them, because they are so off the line and there is so much individual heroism. Many mainline theme TV shows are very profiling [脸谱化], and I don’t like them at all’. In some most ridiculous shows, one hero can tear a Japanese soldier into two halves by hand. Netizens sarcastically describe those shows as ‘anti-Japanese miraculous shows’ [抗日神剧]. However, some quality shows with more objective tones often receive better reception. For instance, the CCTV-made documentary The Rise of Great Nations [《大国崛起》] is accepted by many students. The filmmakers interviewed scholars from different fields and thus presented the ideas with a more objective tone.42 BJS002, a student from Beijing, said:

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42Students also mentioned some news/talk shows programs such as the Military Situation [《军情直播间》], which emphasizes a more objective tone by inviting different experts to the show (ZJS002).
‘Of course we like the materials from other channels … such as The Rise of Great Nations. These are more relaxing … We are more interested in these things’. Nevertheless, he also expressed a strong negative impression of the mainline anti-Japanese shows, for the same reason as ZJS001 implied.

Media also affect students’ cognitive agency by providing more channels for information. The Internet is the most influential case. ZJS001, a student in a small county of Zhejiang, said she constantly use Baidu [百度] or Baidu Baike [百度百科] to search for the information she does not know. Besides Baidu, some students also mentioned Wikipedia, though it is banned in China. However, many students said that they know how to 'climb the wall’ [翻墙]43 to obtain the information banned by the state. As a history teacher (BJT002) in a key high school in Beijing said, ‘The student can get access to various kinds of information at any time he or she wants … After all, it is an information age now’. In fact, many teachers will also use the Internet to collect outside sources for teaching.

The state’s control of information ironically increases the trustworthiness of the Internet. This point is perfectly illustrated by the interview with ZJT001, an enthusiastic history teacher in Zhejiang. When the authors asked his opinions on the influence of the Internet, especially compared with the effect of the textbook, ZJT001 said:

Students will trust the information from other channels. They might think that the textbook only contains the words that everybody dare to say, while on the Internet, people will say what they dare not to say (in daily life). So they think the content on the Internet must be true. In fact, it is not necessarily true.

This might be an unintended consequence of the media censorship.

In addition, family history and memory affect students’ agency by providing ‘authentic’ information and ‘attached’ emotional resonance. Due to the family bond and attachment between the old and young generations, the youth will usually view the family stories as ‘authentic’ and form lived experience. These stories, depicting both negative and positive images of Japan, contributed to the students’ nationalistic or non-nationalistic sentiments.

Negative stories about Japan prevail in the family memory. For example, NJS006, a female student in Nanjing, told the following story:

During that time, some Japanese devils [鬼子] went to my great grandmother’s house. She had many children. The Japanese just called them flower girls [花姑娘], asking her to serve them drinking. Finally she found a chance and escaped with her children … I feel that the Japanese are very evil.

Another touching story comes from NJS002, the girl mentioned before. She said:

My grandmother had a brother who was 29 at that time. He operated a topper shop in the Xiaguan [下关] district, which was under Japanese's control. The Nanjing residents could not get into this district. Therefore, my grandmother’s cousin, who was 20 plus, cut her hair and put dust on the face, kowtowed [叩头] to the Japanese to save my grandfather’s brother. She kowtowed so many times that her head was broken to blood.

One can imagine the student’s emotional shock when she heard this story.

There are also some positive but fewer family stories about Japan found in the interviews. For instance, NJS002 surprisingly told a positive story about Japan after telling the very negative one. She said:

Using my second uncle’s words, there are good Japanese and bad Japanese. For instance, my second uncle’s leg was broken when he was a kid. During that time, there was no good medical equipment in the rural area. So he was taken to the nearby Japanese military camp, where the Japanese doctors cured him.

This positive story makes NJS002 hold a rather complicated view of Japan, which in turn affects her nationalistic sentiment in general.

As all these cases illustrate, media and family memory are more effective factors influencing students’ nationalistic or non-nationalistic sentiments, compared with the traditional history education. As alternative sources of information, they cognitively provide more information channels for critical

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43This refers to the technique of getting access to the websites blocked by the Great Fire Wall of China.
thinking and emotionally create more powerful resonance. It should be noted though, that the authors aim to bring the factors of media and family memory back to the table, but do not argue that they will ‘naturally’ translate into a nationalistic outcome. Their particular effects should be qualitatively and quantitatively tested by further research.

Conclusion

Does history education promote nationalism in China? Drawing on a survey conducted in four Chinese cities, qualitative interviews with high school students and teachers, and a textual analysis of the new history textbooks, this article tests the underlying assumption of the current literature that the state’s history education can effectively instill nationalism in students. The findings show that history education in Chinese high schools has only limited effects on promoting nationalism. The in-class textbook education is largely ineffective in forging nationalistic sentiments among students, while extracurricular activities, such as visiting the ‘patriotic education bases’, have limited effects. The limited effects can be explained by four factors: (1) the change of the content and form of the history textbooks significantly reduces the information on the anti-Japanese war, and makes students less likely to become immersed in official historical knowledge; (2) the students’ actual use of textbooks, especially as preparing for the College Entrance Exam, largely deconstructs the state’s purpose in forging nationalistic sentiments; (3) the students’ cognitive and emotional agencies enable them to critically receive the textbook’s history knowledge and to form complicated readings of the Japan image conveyed by the textbook; and (4) alternative information sources—such as mass media, the Internet, popular culture and family memory—vastly enlarge students’ visions and shape their historical views.

This study focuses on high school students because adolescence is a ‘critical age’ to acquire knowledge of historical events and form worldviews. Also, the research subjects in this study do not belong to the generation who participated in the 1999 anti-US protests or the 2005 anti-Japan protests. In this sense, the findings in this study project the future generation rather than refute previous studies. This new generation is growing up under a reformed history education system, in a new social context with more diverse sources of information. A prediction based on this study is that the new generation will hold more complicated and reflexive views towards nationalism.

Meanwhile, the scope of the ‘limited effect’ argument deserves to be re-emphasized. This study mainly examines the effect of history education in high schools. However, the state also forges historical memory and nationalism in ways other than history education in schools, for example, daily rituals and other symbolic practices. The effect of these other channels is beyond the scope of this study.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the field on Chinese nationalism by rethinking the effect of history education and the statist framework. This study also brings the reception perspective back in through the examination of students’ cognitive and emotional agency. Moreover, this article explores alternative factors such as the media and family memory, and thus provides future theoretical pinpoints in studying Chinese nationalism.

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