

THE NANYANG VOLUNTEERS: A SHARED MEMORY OF CHINA, MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE

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In September 2025, China's commemorations of Victory Day of the War of Resistance against Japan and Martyrs' Day underscored crucial questions: who are China's 21st-century heroes and how are their legacies constructed and mobilised? A defining innovation is China's global turn in reconstructing martyrdom, seeking out Chinese martyrs abroad and weaving their stories of sacrifice and heroism into a narrative of a "global China". This cross-border memorialisation reveals how Beijing extends its influence through memory politics, especially among ethnic Chinese communities. However, beyond China's national borders the Chinese party and state must navigate contexts where local actors are more knowledgeable and authoritative, necessitating compromise, cooperation and co-optation. The revival of the remembrance of the Nanyang Volunteers of the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945) in Malaysia and Singapore is a prominent example. The story of the Nanyang Volunteers symbolises patriotism, heroism and dedication to China, helping China build "memory alliances" with local ethnic Chinese communities and affirming the cohesion of the global Chinese nation. These memory alliances do not necessarily align with China's formal state-to-state relations but nonetheless carry diplomatic weight. For host governments, understanding these evolving practices is critical as they may hold significant implications for both foreign policy and domestic cohesion.

(Click on the link to read the above in [Chinese](#), [French](#) and [Spanish](#))

Chinese:

南洋志愿者：中、马、新的共享记忆

2025年9月，中国在纪念抗日战争胜利纪念日和烈士纪念日的活动中，凸显了两个关键问题：谁是中国的21世纪英雄？他们的遗产如何被构建与动员？一个具有标志性的创新是中国在重构烈士叙事上的全球化转向：在海外寻访中国烈士，并将其牺牲与英勇事迹编织进“全球中国”的叙事之中。这样的跨境纪念实践揭示了北京如何通过记忆政治在海外延展影响力，尤其是在华人社群中。然而，跨出中国的国界后，中国的党国体系必须在当地行动者更为熟悉且更具权威的语境中行事，这需要妥协、合作与吸纳（co-optation）。马来西亚与新加坡对抗战（1937-1945）时期“南洋志愿者”（常指南洋华侨机工）的纪念复兴，即是一例。南洋志愿者的故事象征着爱国、英勇与对中国的奉献，帮助中国与当地华人社群建立“记忆联盟”，并强化“全球中华共同体”的凝聚力。这类记忆联盟不必然与中国正式的国与国关系保持一致，却依然具有外交分量。对于东道国政府而言，理解这些不断演化的实践至关重要，因为它们可能对外交政策与国内凝聚力产生重要影响。

French:

LES VOLONTAIRES DU NANYANG: UNE MÉMOIRE PARTAGÉE DE LA CHINE, DE LA MALAISIE ET DE SINGAPOUR

En septembre 2025, les commémorations par la Chine du Jour de la Victoire de la Guerre de résistance contre le Japon et de la Journée des Martyrs ont soulevé des questions majeures : qui sont les héros chinois du XXI^e siècle et comment leurs héritages sont-ils construits et mobilisés ? Une nouveauté frappante réside dans le tournant global qu'a pris la Chine dans la reconstruction du martyre, consistant à rechercher des martyrs chinois à l'étranger et à tisser leurs récits de sacrifice et d'héroïsme au sein d'une narration sur la « Chine globale ». Cette commémoration transfrontalière révèle comment Pékin mobilise les politiques mémorielles pour étendre son influence, en particulier au sein de la diaspora chinoise. Toutefois, au-delà des frontières nationales de la Chine, le Parti et l'État chinois doivent évoluer dans des contextes où les acteurs locaux sont plus informés et dispose d'une certaine autorité, ce qui nécessite compromis, coopération et cooptation. La renaissance du souvenir des Volontaires du Nanyang de la Guerre de résistance contre le Japon (1937-1945) en Malaisie et à Singapour est à cet égard un exemple édifiant. L'histoire des Volontaires du Nanyang symbolise le patriotisme, l'héroïsme et le dévouement envers la Chine, aidant cette dernière à bâtir des « alliances mémorielles » avec les diasporas chinoises et à affirmer la cohésion de la nation chinoise au niveau mondial. Ces alliances mémorielles ne s'alignent pas nécessairement sur les relations interétatiques formelles de la Chine, mais n'en portent pas moins un poids diplomatique. Pour les gouvernements hôtes,

comprendre ces pratiques en évolution est essentiel, car celles-ci peuvent avoir des implications significatives tant en matière de politique étrangère que de cohésion intérieure.

Spanish:

LOS VOLUNTARIOS DE NANYANG: UNA MEMORIA COMPARTIDA DE CHINA, MALASIA Y SINGAPUR

En septiembre de 2025, las conmemoraciones en China del Día de la Victoria de la Guerra de Resistencia contra Japón y del Día de los Mártires pusieron de relieve preguntas cruciales: ¿quiénes son los héroes de China en el siglo XXI y cómo se construyen y se movilizan sus legados? Una innovación clave es el giro global de China en la reconstrucción del martirio: buscar mártires chinos en el extranjero y tejer sus historias de sacrificio y heroísmo en una narrativa de una “China global”. Esta conmemoración transfronteriza revela cómo Pekín extiende su influencia mediante la política de la memoria, especialmente entre las comunidades de etnia china. Sin embargo, más allá de las fronteras nacionales de China, el partido y el Estado chinos deben desenvolverse en contextos donde los actores locales son más conocedores y poseen mayor autoridad, lo que exige compromiso, cooperación y cooptación. La revitalización del recuerdo de los Voluntarios de Nanyang de la Guerra de Resistencia contra Japón (1937–1945) en Malasia y Singapur es un ejemplo destacado. La historia de los Voluntarios de Nanyang simboliza el patriotismo, el heroísmo y la dedicación a China, ayudando a China a construir “alianzas de memoria” con las comunidades locales de etnia china y afirmando la cohesión de la nación china global. Estas alianzas de memoria no necesariamente se alinean con las relaciones formales de Estado a Estado de China, pero aun así tienen peso diplomático. Para los gobiernos anfitriones, comprender estas prácticas en evolución es crucial, ya que pueden tener implicaciones significativas tanto para la política exterior como para la cohesión interna.

Executive Summary

1. Amid a critical juncture in its nation-building project, China is revitalising and mobilising its pantheon of national heroes and martyrs, with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping asserting that “a promising nation cannot go forward without heroes”.
2. China’s curation of 21st-century heroes offers an invaluable lens to the CCP’s intent and strategic vision. The strategic commemoration of martyrs reveals the ideas and values that underpin China’s rise.
3. China’s martyrdom reconstruction has recently pivoted outward with its global search for Chinese heroes and martyrs. Official figures cite 300+ memorials in 50 countries and regions, honouring over 110,000 martyrs. Abroad, the party-state confronts stronger and more knowledgeable local actors, necessitating more creative strategies of compromise, cooperation and co-optation.
4. The commemoration of the Nanyang Volunteers of the 1937-1945 Sino-Japanese War is emblematic of China’s globalising martyrdom campaign. In Southeast Asia, around 3,200 ethnic Chinese volunteers – almost 90% from British Malaya – were recruited to support the war effort and despatched to China. The majority was initially deployed as truck drivers and mechanics on the Burma Road.
5. When the war ended, around one-third of the Volunteers had sacrificed their lives. Another third eventually returned to Southeast Asia, while the remaining third stayed in China. They came to be known as the Nanyang Drivers and Mechanics, or simply Nanyang Volunteers.
6. Forgotten for decades after the war, the Nanyang Volunteers returned to public memory in the early 2010s across China and Southeast Asia. This resurgence largely coincides with Xi Jinping’s leadership as CCP General Secretary and his notions of the “China Dream” and the “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation”, which foreground solidarity with the overseas Chinese.

7. In Malaysia, the Nanyang Volunteers' story is not particularly sensitive even though it sits uneasily with the dominant Malay identity and Malaysian nationalism. Singapore reaffirms the Volunteers' historical heritage, but remains vigilant against People's Republic of China's (PRC) influence on domestic affairs or foreign policy.
8. Among Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese communities, scholarship has deepened, commemorative events have been organised and new memorials built to honour the Volunteers. In Malaysia, mourning rites, often attended by PRC diplomats, signify the PRC's embrace of the Volunteers in forging a transnational memory alliance with local Chinese communities.
9. Although partially framed as a form of friendship diplomacy with host states, China's globalising martyrdom campaign primarily focuses on local Chinese diasporic and expat communities. This has potentially far-reaching diplomatic and domestic implications that warrant close attention from host governments, particularly those of Singapore and Malaysia.

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China's Quest for New Heroes

1. Amid rising geopolitical tensions, states and national elites innovate their use of the past for present-day political ends, China included. In September 2025, as tensions between China and the United States mounted, China observed two important commemorative dates: Victory Day of the war against Japan¹ and Martyrs' Day.²
2. Both events marked sacrifice and triumph as pillars of national rejuvenation and highlighted the endurance required along the way. According to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping, "a promising nation cannot go forward without heroes".³ Enlisting the past to serve the present,⁴ the Chinese government

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¹ Zhang Bowen and Cao Peixian, "(V-Day) Xinhua Headlines: China Holds Massive V-Day Parade, Pledging Peaceful Development", *Xinhua*, 3 September 2025, <https://english.news.cn/20250903/b801d1aec1f1477b9a7f0bb189b6f5cd/c.html>, accessed 24 September 2025.

² "Understanding China's Past and Future on Martyrs' Day", *Global Times*, 30 September 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202309/1299153.shtml>, accessed 24 September 2025.

³ "Xi's Remarks on National Heroes, Martyrs", *China Daily*, 4 April 2024, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202404/04/WS660ddac0a31082fc043c04ee.html>, accessed 19 September 2025.

⁴ "To make the past serve the present" is the first part of a quote from Mao Zedong that runs as follows: "to make the past serve the present, to make foreign things serve China" (古为今用, 洋为中用). For the purposes of this *Background Brief*, it is particularly germane that Mao in this statement coupled the past with foreign things, and the present with China. These connections clearly are still part of the CCP's ideological reservoir; see Mao Zedong, "Tong yinyue gongzuo zhe de tanhua" (Address to music workers), 24 August 1956, cited in Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People's Republic* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), p. 1.

established a Martyrs' Day in 2014 and promulgated a Heroes and Martyrs Protection Law in 2018.⁵

3. Under Xi, the government has moved to refashion the Qingming Festival (Tomb Sweeping Holiday) into an occasion for honouring national martyrs, propagating the idea that there is no difference between one's own forebears and those of the nation.⁶
4. These moves are part of a whole-of-government effort to promote patriotism, collectivism and other socialist core values both within China and among Chinese communities abroad, with the overarching aim of strengthening national unity and cohesion.⁷
5. The government has embarked on a four-pronged strategy to promote a spirit of sacrifice and foster a new generation of patriotic heroes and potential martyrs. Its first move shifts the emphasis from the older revolutionary martyrs to a wider group of present-day Chinese patriots from "all walks of life" who advance peacetime development and human security.⁸
6. A second major innovation is a technological shift towards virtual "memoriscapes" and online commemoration practices and services, which have become more widespread since the COVID-19 lockdowns. Moving remembrance online expands access while mitigating politicisation risks associated with public commemorations.⁹

⁵ Vincent K L Chang, "China's Memory Laws: The Global Reach of Beijing's Push to Juridify Memory", *Verfassungsblog*, 2 May 2024, <https://verfassungsblog.de/chinas-memory-laws/>, accessed 20 September 2025.

⁶ Shen Ruochong, "Mianhuai xianlie shiji, chuancheng yinglie jingshen" (Commemorating the martyrs' deeds, carrying forward the heroes' spirit), *Renminwang – Guandian pindao* (People's Daily Online – Opinion Channel), 13 March 2024, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2024/0331/c223228-40207138.html>, accessed 20 September 2025.

⁷ Zhou Jingnan, Le Tian, "Backgrounder: China's Martyrs' Day", CGTN, 3 October 2018, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514f304d544e7a457a6333566d54/index.html>, accessed 20 September 2025.

⁸ "Live: Special Coverage of the Ceremony Commemorating Martyrs' Day in Tian'anmen Square", CGTN, 30 September 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4YwZkmHIJ4>, accessed 20 September 2025.

⁹ Li Lei, "Chinese Going Online for Tomb Sweeping", *China Daily*, 5 April 2024, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202404/05/WS660f4cb6a31082fc043c066e.html>, accessed 20 September 2025.

7. A third key innovation is a legal turn aligned with Xi Jinping's goal of building a "law-based country". The 2018 Heroes and Martyrs Protection Law urges citizens to "respect, study and defend" national heroes and criminalises their defamation. Aimed principally at domestic audiences, the new regulations also include provisions for commemorating Chinese martyrs abroad.

Martyrs for Global China

8. A fourth innovation is the outward pivot in its global search for Chinese martyrs and their mobilisation for Beijing's diplomacy and domestic propaganda.
9. Chinese embassies and consulates around the world have intensified official commemorations of nationals killed during historical conflicts overseas, from World War II martyrs in Southeast Asia to casualties in Korean and Vietnam wars and those killed in Serbia during the 1999 NATO bombing.¹⁰
10. Diplomatic missions are also expected to organise commemorations involving local Chinese diasporic and expat communities. Reflecting the new emphasis on peacetime China, these overseas martyrs include Chinese engineers and workers who gave their lives while engaged in infrastructure construction or aid provision across Southeast Asia, Pakistan, Africa and Europe.¹¹

2025; Zhonghua yinglie wang (chinamartyrs.gov.cn), <https://yinglie.chinamartyrs.gov.cn/24qm/flower.html>, accessed 20 September 2025.

¹⁰ Julian Ryall, "Will a Japanese Memorial to Chinese Victims of Wartime Forced Labour Further Anger South Korea?" *South China Morning Post*, 7 July 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3184422/will-japanese-memorial-chinese-victims-wartime-forced-labour>; "Xi Pays Homage to Chinese People's Volunteer Army Martyrs in Pyongyang", *Xinhua*, 21 June 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/21/c_138162547.htm; "In Solidarity and Grief, Chinese Fallen Soldiers Honored in Vietnam", *Xinhua*, 4 April 2019; "Serbia, China Honor Chinese Martyrs Killed in NATO Bombing", *Xinhua*, 7 May 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220507/34b13e9c761446888e0f0f9c45dc152b/c.html>, all accessed 20 September 2025.

¹¹ Liu Yuyuan, "Chinese Embassy in Cambodia Issues Article Commemorating Chinese Martyrs Died in Aiding Cambodia", *China Military Online*, 2 April 2021, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/4882466.html; "Memorial Park Guardian: Keeper of China-Pakistan Friendship", *Xinhua*, 19 April 2014, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015xivisitpse/2015-04/19/content_20474841.htm; "Zambia Opens Memorial for Chinese Railway Workers Who Died Building Africa's Tazara Line", *South China Morning Post*, 23 August 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/video/china/3189857/zambia-opens-memorial-chinese-railway-workers-who-died-building-africas-tazara>; "Chinese Embassy in Malta Pays Tribute to the Engineers Buried in Malta", Embassy of the PRC in the Republic of Malta, 30 September 2021, http://mt.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwtp/202109/t20210930_9588419.htm, all accessed 20 September 2025.

11. China's new mnemonic outreach to build transnational memory alliances contrasts with a long-standing thrust in China's international memory politics that aggressively assert grievance-based narratives, most notably "the century of national humiliation" or the Sino-Japanese War.
12. This latter dimension of Chinese memory politics serves as deterrence against foreign states and other international actors (in particular Western and Japanese companies and international organisations), whose historical portrayals are deemed to threaten China's official narratives that underpin national unity and the "ontological security" of the state.¹²
13. In contrast, Beijing's newer approach foregrounds more constructive, conciliatory and empowering uses of transnational memory to engage overseas Chinese communities and, in some cases, local societies and host governments.

The Nanyang Volunteers

14. When the Sino-Japanese War broke out in July 1937, overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia contributed significant donations and remittances and mounted a large-scale boycott of Japanese products.¹³
15. By 1938, most of China's coastal areas had fallen under Japanese occupation. The Burma Road, constructed in just nine months in 1938-1939, became the crucial international supply route for the Republic of China (ROC)-controlled inland territories. However, China faced a critical shortage of trained drivers and truck mechanics for the supply convoys.¹⁴

¹² Karl Gustafsson and Maria Mälksoo, "Memory-Political Deterrence: Shielding Collective Memory and Ontological Security through Dissuasion", *International Studies Quarterly* 68(1), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae006> (2024).

¹³ Stephen Leong, "The Malayan Overseas Chinese and Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1941", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 10(2): 292-320 (1979).

¹⁴ Xia Yuqing, *Weile wangque de aiguo zhe: Nanyang huaqiao jigong yanjiu* (For the Forgotten Patriots: A Study of the Nanyang Volunteer Drivers and Mechanics), Guangzhou: Jinan daxue chubanshe (2016), p. 27.

16. In response, the Nanyang Federation of China Relief Fund (NFCRF, *Nanyang Huaqiao chouzheng zuguo nanmin zonghui* 南洋华侨筹赈祖国难民总会) in Southeast Asia headed by Tan Kah Kee (Chen Jiageng 陈嘉庚) organised a region-wide recruitment drive. In total, around 3,200 volunteers were recruited and despatched to China. Almost 90% of the volunteers came from British Malaya.¹⁵
17. By 1940, the Burma Road was supplying an average of 20,000 tons of goods to China per month¹⁶ until Japan's full occupation of Burma severed this vital lifeline in May 1942. Some volunteers found new missions supporting the airlift from British India into China, while others joined the ROC Army, the Allies' intelligence, or the CCP's Eighth Route Army.¹⁷
18. When the war ended, around a third of the Volunteers had fallen; a third returned to Southeast Asia, while the remaining third stayed in China. Across China and Southeast Asia, they came to be known as the Nanyang Drivers and Mechanics (*nanqiao jigong* 南侨机工), or simply the Nanyang Volunteers.

Remembering the Nanyang Volunteers

19. The memory of the Nanyang Volunteers can be divided into three phases. The first phase, between 1945 and the early 1980s, saw sporadic commemorations before the Volunteers lapsed into obscurity in China, Malaysia and Singapore. The second phase, from the 1980s until the 2010s, saw the rediscovery of the Volunteers and initial efforts to preserve their memory.
20. The current third phase, which began in the early 2010s, marked a full revival of the memory of the Nanyang Volunteers, particularly within China. This phase largely coincides with Xi Jinping's tenure as CCP General Secretary and his nationalist

¹⁵ Xia Yuqing, *Nanyang huaqiao jigong yanjiu: 1939-1946* (A Study of the Nanyang Volunteer Drivers and Mechanics, 1939-1946), Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe (2016), pp. 92-100.

¹⁶ Rana Mitter, *China's War with Japan, 1937-1945: The Struggle for Survival*. London: Penguin Books (2014), p. 246.

¹⁷ Qin Qinzhi and Tang Jialin, *Nanqiao jigong huiguo kangri shi* (History of the Nanyang Volunteers in China's War of Resistance), Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe (1989), pp. 119-138.

notions of the “China Dream” and the “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation”, which foreground solidarity with overseas Chinese.

21. Although formal policy in China continues to make a careful distinction between PRC citizens and foreign nationals of Chinese descent, Xi emphasises and reinforces shared roots and common heritage among all Chinese people. The story of the Nanyang Volunteers fits well into this nationalistic turn.
22. The popularisation of the story of the Nanyang Volunteers kicked off with a 2010 documentary on the Volunteers on Yunnan Television followed by several other programmes, including the 2015 TV drama *The Heroic Legends of the Nanyang Volunteer Drivers and Mechanics* (*Nanqiao jigong yingxiong zhuan* 南侨机工英雄传) which recast the Volunteers as patriotic mass entertainment.
23. In 2017, a monument in Wanding (畹町), a frontier town in Yunnan, was incorporated into the Nanyang Volunteers Museum, which hosted major commemorative activities in 2009 and 2019. In 2021, the Kunming Museum opened a new branch dedicated to the Nanyang Volunteers, featuring an online virtual-reality exhibition.¹⁸ Expanded support for Chinese researchers further elevated the status of the subject.
24. In 2015, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office took overseas Chinese youth on a tour of these sites in Yunnan, leveraging the Volunteers’ story to inspire “all Chinese inside and outside of China” (*haineiwai zhonghua ernü* 海内外中华儿女) to love the motherland, reinforce their Chinese cultural identity, mobilise support for China’s Belt and Road Initiative and support the reunification with Taiwan.¹⁹

¹⁸ “Kunmingshi bowuguan nanqiao jigong fenguan” (Nanqiao Machinery Workers Branch of Kunming Museum), *Baidu baike* (Chinese online encyclopaedia), last updated 8 June 2025, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%98%86%E6%98%8E%E5%B8%82%E5%8D%9A%E7%89%A9%E9%A6%86%E5%8D%97%E4%BE%A8%E6%9C%BA%E5%B7%A5%E5%88%86%E9%A6%86/58497647>, accessed 5 September 2025.

¹⁹ “Nanqiao jigong, cong fenghuo xiaoyan zhong zou lai (Nanyang Volunteers, Who came through the War), *Renmin ribao* (*People’s Daily*), 31 October 2016, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrhwb/html/2016-10/31/content_1722635.htm; “Shijie huayi jiechu qingnian fu yunnan chongzou nanqiao jigong zhi lu (World’s distinguished Chinese youth go to Yunnan to retrace the road of Nanyang Volunteers), *Zhongguo xinwenwang* (China News Net), 24 May 2015, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2015-05-24/202531870544.shtml>, all accessed 5 September 2025; Xia Yuqing, “Hongyang ‘nanqiao jigong’ aiguo zhuyi jingshen ningju qiaoxin

25. In Malaysia and Singapore, the third-phase revival of Nanyang Volunteers memory was community-driven. In June 2011, community activists affiliated with the Research Society on the World War II and their partners in Singapore organised a cross-border “Retracing the Burma Road” (*chongzou dianmian gonglu* 重走滇緬公路) event.
26. Launched in Singapore by a cabinet minister and the PRC ambassador, the convoy received strong backing from Yunnan and Guizhou authorities and organisations.²⁰ The “Retracing the Burma Road” event was repeated in 2024 to mark the 50th anniversary of Malaysia-China diplomatic ties.²¹
27. As in China, Malaysia and Singapore saw a surge of more rigorous scholarship on the Volunteers, enabled by expanding access to archives in China and Taiwan and years of systematic local collection of oral-history collection.
28. New memorial sites have also been built to honour the Volunteers. In 2013, several prominent Singapore Chinese community organisations jointly funded a Nanyang Volunteers sculpture in Wanqingyuan (晚清园, also known as the Sun Yat-Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall),²² an initiative debated in Parliament and supported by the government.²³
29. In Malaysia, local Chinese communities fully funded two new Nanyang Volunteers monuments (in Kulai in 2013 and Kuching in 2016). In 2025, a new memorial

qiaoli gongyuan zhongguo meng (Publicising the patriotic spirit of the Nanyang Volunteers to unite the support of the overseas Chinese in fulfilling the China Dream”, *Qiaowu gongzuo yanjiu* (Overseas Chinese Affairs Research), 2020(6).

²⁰ Zou Lu, *Gandong de lücheng: chongzou nanqiao jigong dianmianlu* (A touching journey: retracing the Burma Road of the Nanyang Volunteers), Singapore: Ling Zi (2013).

²¹ “Chongzou nanqiao jigong dianmianlu huodong juban” (Organising the activity of retracing of the Burma Road by Nanyang Volunteers), *Renmin ribao* (People’s Daily), 11 September 2024, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/html/2024-09/11/content_26079832.htm, accessed 5 September 2025.

²² Lin Xiaosheng (Lim How Seng), Ye Zhongling (Yeap Chong Leng) and Cui guiqiang (Choi Kwai Keong), *Cong zhengmu dao fuyuan: nanqiao jigong huiguo kangri she* (From recruitment to demobilisation: the history of Nanyang drivers and mechanics returning to China in the War of Resistance), Singapore: Nanyang xuehui (2023), pp. 165-166.

²³ Zou 2013, 232-237.

pavilion dedicated to the volunteers was unveiled at the Malaysia-China Friendship Park in Kuching,²⁴ while a memorial park commemorating the Nanyang Volunteers was opened to the public in Kuala Lumpur.²⁵

30. Unlike in Singapore, public mourning (*gongji* 公祭) rituals are staged at the newly built monuments in Malaysia on key commemorative dates. PRC diplomats regularly attend as guests, indicating the PRC's embrace of the volunteers in forging a memory alliance with the local Chinese. An ethnic Chinese Malaysian minister typically attends as a representative of the Chinese community rather than in an official capacity.
31. Huang Huikang (黄惠康), the PRC ambassador to Malaysia from 2014 to 2017, became the first PRC diplomat to participate in the *gongji* rituals in Kuala Lumpur. The PRC consulate-generals in Penang and Kuching soon followed.
32. At these events, PRC diplomats portray the Nanyang Volunteers as exemplary patriots and heroes, exemplifying the life-and-blood bond uniting the descendants of Emperors Huang and Yan. They also cast this memory not just about heroic sacrifices but also a lesson for peace and a symbol of friendship.²⁶
33. During the *gongji* activities in Malaysia, ROC representatives have become increasingly marginalised, both by Beijing's expanding presence and Taipei's political orientation. Unlike the Guomindang (Nationalist Party), Taiwan's

²⁴ Marilyn Ten, "Memorial Pavilion in Kuching honours WWII Nanyang Volunteers", *Borneo Post*, 14 May 2025, <https://www.theborneopost.com/2025/05/14/memorial-pavilion-in-kuching-honours-wwii-nanyang-volunteers/>, accessed 5 September 2025.

²⁵ Jonathan Tham and Wang Jiawei, "Memorial Park in Kuala Lumpur Honors WWII Nanyang Volunteers", *Xinhua*, 23 August 2025, <https://english.news.cn/20250823/5d64a3ebb3354603af66c301b4e0bbca/c.html>, accessed 5 September 2025.

²⁶ "Zhu bincheng zonglingshi lu shiwei zai bin langyu huaqiao kangzhan xunzhijigong ji linan tongbao jinianbei gongji shang de jianghua" [Talk of the Penang Consulate General on the public commemoration at the Penang Monument], 12 November 2018, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/dszlsjt_673036/zls_673040/201811/t2018_jigong_ji1112_7457736.shtml; "Zhu gujin zonglingguan fu nanqiao jigongbei jidian kangri yinglie" (Consulate General in Kuching commemorates the anti-Japanese martyrs at the Nanyang Volunteers Monument), 4 April 2024, http://kuching.china-consulate.gov.cn/chn/xwdt/202404/t20240408_11277784.htm; "Zhu bincheng zonglingshi zhou youbin zai binlangyu huaqiao kangzhan xunzhi ji linan tongbao gongji huodong shang de zhici" (Speech of Consulate General in Penang Zhou Youbin at the public commemoration at Penang Monument), 11 November, http://penang.china-consulate.gov.cn/chn/zlxxx/jhywz/202211/t20221111_10972990.htm, all accessed 22 September 2025.

incumbent Democratic Progressive Party eschews the claim to represent all China and has downplayed China's historical experience in public commemoration.²⁷

China's Mnemonic Outreach and the Nanyang Volunteers

34. In the last 15 years, the PRC has leveraged Nanyang Volunteers commemorations to strengthen solidarity with Malaysia and Singapore. This connection is strongest at the community and non-official level, especially in Malaysia, downplaying its potential diplomatic and foreign policy implications.
35. As an emblem of patriotism, heroism and dedication to China, the Nanyang Volunteers narrative serves as a mnemonic tool for the PRC to deepen memory alliances with local ethnic Chinese and affirm a cohesive global Chinese nation that transcends borders.
36. The PRC's shaping of the Nanyang Volunteers' memory resolves the national-transnational paradox: it reinforces China's image as peace-loving sovereignty-respecting while simultaneously projecting a border-transcending vision of global Chinese solidarity.
37. In Malaysia and Singapore, local Chinese community leaders, especially the older generations, largely accept Beijing's message, though some, wary of the political implications of China's proactive mnemonic policy, steer commemorations away from geopolitical connotations.
38. At the national level, the Volunteers' story is broadly non-sensitive in Malaysia, despite its uneasy fit with the country's dominant Malay identity and Malaysian nationalism. The government has grown comfortable with expanding interactions between Malaysia's ethnic Chinese and China, given the economic dividends.

²⁷ Since 2021, the official date of *gongji* of the Kuala Lumpur monument shifted from Qingming to 7 July. The PRC ambassador attends the larger and more prominent 7 July event. A smaller event with ROC participation is held at the Qingming festival in April.

39. Among Malaysia's Malay majority and other ethnic groups, the Volunteers' story typically draws indifference rather than hostility.²⁸ The government maintains a permissive attitude, as long as the narratives of ethnic Chinese support for wartime China remains historical and do not impinge on Malaysia's foreign relations and domestic ethnic harmony.
40. Commemorations of Nanyang Volunteers are more tightly circumscribed in Singapore. Like in Malaysia, the government's remembrance of World War II focuses on the contributions of all ethnic groups to the anti-Japanese struggle in war-time Malaya itself, rather than the contribution of Nanyang Volunteers to the war in China.²⁹
41. More so than in Malaysia, Singapore is particularly wary of imputations of the Volunteers' political sympathy or even their allegiance to the CCP. It limits PRC diplomatic involvement in mnemonic events in Singapore and confines local Chinese communities to depoliticised, sanitised events.
42. Singapore recognises the Volunteers' heritage value and is even willing to give official endorsement to certain memorial activities that eschew a China-centric focus, but remains vigilant against any PRC influence or interference in Singapore's domestic affairs or foreign policy.

The Political Relevance of China's Memory Alliances

43. As China has arrived at a critical juncture of its nation-building project, discerning who its 21st century heroes are, how they are created and how their legacies are

²⁸ At a launching ceremony for the film *1146* (note 10), Azmir Saifuddin Mutalib, the Chief Executive Officer of the National Film Development Cooperation Malaysia (the government's governing body in charge of film industry) sent a congratulatory clip. He was clearly hoping that the film performs strongly in the Chinese market and generates greater Chinese tourist interest in Malaysia.

²⁹ This holds true for Tan Kah Kee, Singapore and Malaysia's most prominent ethnic-Chinese supporter of China's anti-Japanese resistance. In Singapore, official memory is largely silent on his 1950 return to China and subsequent involvement in the communist regime in China (see Yong 2014, 338-345). The most prominent officially endorsed overseas Chinese war martyr in Singapore is not a Nanyang Volunteer but Lim Bo Seng (Lin Mousheng), who organised anti-Japanese boycotts in Malaya after Japan's invasion of China and subsequently worked with the British and ROC intelligence services, but never fought in China itself (see for instance Lin 2024 and Sun 2024).

mediated serves as an invaluable shortcut to understanding the CCP's intent. The strategic memorialisation of martyrs clarifies the implications of a "global China", both for the world and for specific regions and countries.

44. China's memory politics regarding the Nanyang Volunteers is in stark contrast to Malaysia's and Singapore's: Beijing foregrounds ethnic-Chinese heroism linked to China, while both governments centre the Southeast Asian war theatre and the contributions of all communities in their multi-ethnic polities.
45. Both Malaysia and Singapore continue to maintain friendly relations with China, but as China becomes stronger and more assertive, the two countries are compelled to manage their relationship with China more carefully, leveraging mutually beneficial opportunities while remaining vigilant to emerging vulnerabilities.
46. As China's global footprint expands, the presence of the CCP and the Chinese state across the world is also expanding. Beyond China's borders, the Chinese party and state encounter local actors with superior knowledge and leverage, requiring strategies of compromise, cooperation and co-optation rather than dominance and force.
47. Emerging cross-border memory alliances do not necessarily align with China's formal diplomacy. These informal alliances can remain sufficiently non-confrontational to take root and evolve, even as they occasionally sit uneasily with the national identities of the Southeast Asian states whose citizens they involve.
48. Memories of the Nanyang Volunteers are not a deterrent tool to compel acceptance of China's historical narratives or safeguard its "ontological security". Rather, it exemplifies a seemingly softer, consensual mnemonic strategy to forge, expand and reinforce a global Chinese nation that transcends national borders. Nevertheless, China's shift towards a more active memory diplomacy and martyrdom policy is evident: official figures cite over 300 Chinese memorial facilities across 50 countries and regions honouring more than 110,000 Chinese martyrs.³⁰ Between

³⁰ "Zhongguo guanfang: yi wancheng 10 yu guo jin 20 chu jingwai lieshi jinian sheshi xiushan baohu" (Chinese officials: Nearly 20 overseas martyrs' memorial facilities have been repaired and protected in more

2020 and 2025, China designated six overseas World War II memorial sites in Russia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and Malaysia.³¹

49. China's mnemonic appropriation now stretches beyond national boundaries and perhaps also beyond consensual cooperation with friendly diasporic communities. Whilst it is unclear whether host governments sanctioned these site designations, they signal an intensifying web of cross-border memory alliances with both state and non-state actors.³²
50. Ahead of his April 2025 state visit to Malaysia, Xi Jinping praised the Nanyang Volunteers in Chinese-, Malay- and English-language Malaysian newspapers urging China and Malaysia to "work together to add new impetus to our friendship that has sailed all the way down the river of history, and steer this ship steadily into the future".³³
51. These recent developments suggest China's ambition to transform the memory of the World War II Allied struggle and the legacy of the Volunteers into diplomatic instruments. While China's current mnemonic outreach focuses on cross-border memory alliances with ethnic Chinese, it may have implications that warrant close attention from governments, notably those of Singapore and Malaysia.

than 10 countries), *Zhongguo xinwenwang* (China News Agency), 29 April 2024, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2024/04-29/10208654.shtml>, accessed 24 September 2025.

³¹ "Chart of the Day: China Unveils New Batch of War of Resistance Memorial Sites and Heroes", *CGTN*, 31 August 2025, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2025-08-31/Chart-of-the-Day-A-guide-to-China-s-War-of-Resistance-memorial-sites-1GhTxdpY0lq/p.html>, accessed 22 September 2025.

³² The very clear common stance taken by China and Russia regarding the memory and legacy of World War II also illustrates the trend towards a more proactive memory diplomacy. See Kainan Gao and Margaret Pearson, "Military Parades and Memory Wars: China and Russia Commemorate History to Reimagine International Order", Brookings Institution, 27 August 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/military-parades-and-memory-wars-china-and-russia-commemorate-history-to-reimagine-international-order/>, accessed 22 September 2025.

³³ Laura Zhou, "Could Remembering Shared World War II History Be the Key to Better China-US Ties?" *South China Morning Post*, 31 August 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3323755/could-remembering-shared-world-war-ii-history-be-key-better-china-us-ties>, accessed 22 September 2025.

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