

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Political captives in East Asia: Thought reform and national security

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Abstract

Thought reform campaigns aimed at the psychological transformation of captives have long been tools to enhance national security and political legitimacy in East Asia. Fusing Soviet concepts of human perfectibility and Confucian ideals of transformation through education, sophisticated systems have evolved to convert political opponents. Whether labelled as *tenkō* in Japan, ‘self-renovation’ in Nationalist China, or ‘new learning’ in the People’s Republic of China, these programmes shared the fundamental goal of pressuring individuals to renounce previous beliefs and adopt state-sanctioned ideologies. This article examines how Japanese war crimes prisoners, political dissidents, and former Chinese Nationalist officers experienced these campaigns. Despite differences in implementation, each regime used confession, group study, and psychological coercion. This historical perspective is particularly relevant today as China’s leadership continues to weaponise historical narratives – including the ‘correct’ understandings of WWII history – with implications for contemporary tensions between China and Taiwan.

Keywords: China; Japan; KMT; mobilisation; PRC; propaganda; Taiwan; thought reform

In recent years, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin have met several times for high-level foreign policy discussions.¹ In May 2024 the two leaders signed a ‘Joint Statement on Deepening the China–Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the New Era’. What exactly defines this ‘new era’ remains opaque, but this moment was pregnant with meaning, not only because it was the eve of their 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations. Specifically, the lengthy official Chinese version of the statement highlights the centrality that historical perceptions play in the region’s security politics. The announcement emphasised:

Both sides continue to steadfastly defend the victorious results following World War Two, recorded in the postwar world order of the United Nations Charter, and oppose those who negate, distort, or revise WWII history. Both sides stipulate they must advance proper historical education and do their utmost to protect the world’s anti-fascist commemorative institutions, and also protect them from blasphemy or destruction, while sternly criticizing any beautification of this era, such as going so far as to vainly resurrect Nazi ideological or militarism.²

¹Sergey Radchenko, ‘China Doesn’t Want to Lead an Axis’, *Foreign Affairs* (18 February 2025), available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-doesnt-want-lead-axis>.

²‘Shuang fang jiang jixu jianding hanwei di erci shijie dazhan zhengli chengguo yiji zairu...’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202405/t20240516_11305860.shtml, accessed 1 November 2025.

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In language that underscores how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sees historical narrative as the platform on which its legitimacy is based, both countries assert that a ‘correct understanding’ of history is essential for the health of national security. Less than two years later, in September 2025, Taiwanese leaders criticised the PRC for spending an estimated five billion dollars to stage a massive military parade commemorating the eightieth year end of World War Two, a moment for which the Chinese Communists claim victory. Such declarations are not as new as they may appear because orienting public opinion towards certain historical beliefs has a long history in modern East Asia. In fact, this policy builds on an alignment the PRC had already initiated during the handover of power from President Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping.

In May 2013, the Central Committee General Office published an internal directive, colloquially known as ‘Document Number 9’, which aimed to clamp down on any ideas that were found to be ‘promoting historical nihilism’. Such beliefs were defined as attempts to ‘undermine the history of the CCP and of New China’. In short, touting any historical opinion that did not emerge from state-sanctioned sources was treasonous.³ Chinese leaders made clear they believe that while historical nihilism claims to reassess history, its real goal seeks to reject official CCP history in an effort ‘to fundamentally undermine the CCP’s historical purpose, which is tantamount to denying the legitimacy of the CCP’s long-term political dominance.’⁴ Oppressing any significant portion of the population that questions unapproved non-state opinions about the past can also extend to non-historical realms as well.

The PRC is not only crafting historical narratives to bolster mainland national security goals. Its long-anticipated military and political aims to ‘correct’ history are also aimed at the Republic of China (ROC, commonly referred to as Taiwan). Over the last few years, increasingly shrill pronouncements have been made by President Xi that he will restore China to its original whole. Reflecting concerns that forced unification was on the near horizon, in 2021 *The Economist* cover story reported that Taiwan was turning into ‘the most dangerous place on Earth.’⁵ As Japanese Sinologist Matsuda Yasuhiro points out, the PRC maintains that its military is still the ‘People’s Liberation Army’, and Beijing has never altered that stance, purposely not calling it a ‘national defense military’. These labels signify that a core element of mainland China’s legitimacy resides in the unfinished political task of reuniting all Chinese under one flag.⁶

Because unification would involve PRC efforts to transform Taiwanese historical thinking, this article looks back in time at the thought reform campaigns utilised to remobilise or demobilise societies. With the proliferation of social media, cell phones, and the internet – and after eighty years of cultural and political separation – twenty-first-century thought reform efforts would differ from PRC campaigns of yesteryear. Taiwan and the PRC share less culture than they did during the campaigns before China’s civil war (1945–9). Regardless, the fundamentals remain similar because while political strategies and military weapons assessments are key to victory in battle, the sense of history that a population embraces as its own, and the ideology on which it builds political consensus, grows even more important once the roar of the canons have stopped.

³I make a point that changing minds and staging visible acts of ideological transformation to signal regime power are two different strategies. An anonymous review for this special issue upgraded my thoughts perhaps better when they noted that Hobbes writes ‘it is immaterial what people *believe*; what matters is how they *behave*; and an effective sovereign is one that controls behavior to ensure against discordant conduct’. I heartily concur but also detect that in the early years PRC and KMT leaders believed that changing the minds of their enemies was important to prove socialism was preferable as a political institution, not just as political window dressing. See also Timothy Cheek, *Propaganda and Culture in Mao’s China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁴‘Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation: How Much Is a Hardline Party Directive Shaping China’s Current Political Climate?’, ChinaFile (8 November 2013), available at: <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>; Eto Naoko, ‘Anti-Western sentiment in Chinese politics: Why China rejects universal values’, *Contemporary Japan and East-Asian Studies*, 2:3 (2018), pp. 1–14.

⁵See the front cover of *The Economist*, 21 May 2021.

⁶Matsuda Yasuhiro, ‘Joron: naze chūgoku wa taiwan o shihai shitai no ka?’, in Matsuda Yasuhiro et al. (eds), *Taiwan yūji yokushi dekiru ka* (Keisō Shobō, 2025), pp. 2–3.

National security was a central issue for newly established states at the start of the post-WWII era – how would shaky and newly formed regimes corral an entire population to shift on its political axis? Then, as now, the two Chinas needed to sustain their legitimacy but also decorate themselves as international examples of political success.⁷ The thorny problem of how to pressure those in opposition – or those newly incorporated into the unified state – towards supporting a new regime had to be met head on. Chinese of all political stripes (both the CCP and the Chinese Nationalist Party – KMT) began to implement programmes for the re-education of domestic and international prisoners (of varying classes and groups) to shore up regime stability. Re-education also served as state propaganda. The PRC needed to persuade political prisoners that the communist path was correct before it could use thought-reformed subjects as examples of PRC political greatness in media campaigns both at home and abroad. The ROC implemented similar plans.

In East Asian international relations, the re-education of political rivals – particularly those held in captivity – has historically been an important national security tool. Thought reform, another name for re-education, has been used for intelligence and propaganda purposes at considerable psychological costs to the captives, and with variable benefit to the captors.⁸ This article will illuminate how these plans were implemented first in imperial Japan, before being imported by post-war Taiwan and the PRC. Innumerable memoirs and stories of captivity for political use – essentially extra-legal measures to implement a variety of legitimising tactics – by these East Asian regimes suggest how much they had – and, in the PRC, still have – in common. Here we compare them as they involved prisoners of thought reform in areas dominated by the imperial Japanese authorities, the KMT, and the CCP.

What is thought reform?

George Orwell's famous treatise on mind control, *1984*, is frequently cited in related analyses of thought reform, but here we are not just talking about brute force, the sort experienced by the novel's protagonist, Winston Smith. As Anne Applebaum writes in her history of post-war Eastern Europe, 'a totalitarian regime is one which bans all institutions apart from those it has officially approved'.⁹ The Polish émigré author and Nobel Prize winner, Czesław Miłosz, presaged Applebaum's observations by close to half a century in his summation that thought reform creates what he called a 'captive mind'. Miłosz described a subtle system that exerts a great pressure of conformity: 'nothing worthwhile can exist outside its limits'.¹⁰ The recanting founding member of the Italian Communist Party, Ignazio Silone, wrote similarly that the result of thought reform was the ability to experience one thing and then to affirm the exact opposite in public. This behaviour demonstrated piousness to the cause that the authorities wished to champion.¹¹

Thought reform practices were not limited to the supposedly mysterious orient, as was sometimes argued during the early 1950s when fears of 'Manchurian candidates' loomed.¹² In fact, the USSR held large numbers of Germans years after World War Two concluded and first released those who preferred (or pretended to prefer) residing in Communist East Germany (the Deutsche Demokratische Republik).¹³ The Cold War developed into a staged competition involving hostage taking and tactics for re-education. Re-education training was perhaps most prevalent during

⁷ Heike Holbig and Bruce Gilley, 'Reclaiming legitimacy in China', *Politics & Policy*, 38:3 (2010), pp. 395–422; David L. Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (University of California Press, 2009), pp. 124–7.

⁸ Richard J. Samuels, *Special Duty: A History of the Japanese Intelligence Community* (Cornell University Press, 2019); Frederic Wakeman, *Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese Secret Service* (University of California Press, 2003).

⁹ Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944–1956* (Allen Lane, 2012), p. xxiii.

¹⁰ Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (Vintage Books, 1955), p. 12.

¹¹ Ignazio Silone, 'Ignazio Silone', in Richard Crossman (ed.), *The God that Failed* (Harper and Row, 1949), p. 105.

¹² Barak Kushner, 'The real Manchurian candidates: Chinese war criminals in the postwar, prisoners of history', *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 20:1 (January 2023), pp. 19–37.

¹³ For difficulties the Germans experienced in repatriating, see: Frank Biess, *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

WWII but then continued long after. For example, until 2002 North Korea maintained a special unit for kidnapping civilians so it could teach foreign languages to its upcoming generation of spies, as P. Anh Nguyen and Todd Hall, Nick Ackert and Richard Samuels, and Nina Krickel-Choi and Minseon Ku discuss in their contributions to this volume. The Soviet mass incarceration of post-war Japanese POWs is well known, but less so is the plight of thousands of high-ranking KMT POWs detained in mainland China without trial or charges until the mid-1970s, when they were finally released in a series of high-profile amnesties. The politically motivated incarceration of soldiers and political activists subjected to forced ideological reform was refined to feed a propaganda machine.

The origins

The use (and abuse) of political captives in East Asia emerges from a longer history of the idea that individuals can be reshaped according to ideological principles. In the early twentieth century, such practices emerged from Soviet concepts about the perfectibility of man that coincided with older Confucian ideals of *jiaohua*, transformation through education. The growth of this ‘compelling ideal’, as Jan Kiely puts it, was how to construct a system in which this renovation of thought could most effectively be achieved.¹⁴ This practice was oriented mainly towards political opponents and later weaponised as a tool of war during Japan’s empire in East Asia, and after its collapse by the formerly colonised. In East Asian politics of the period, the apostasy of abandoning loyalty to ideas – especially those deemed contrary by the authorities in power – supposedly led to a higher political consciousness and thus incorporation into the new body politic. The content and formulation of the process of getting individuals to renounce their previously cherished convictions helps us view ideas of nationalism and political ideology in sharp relief.

One classic example is that of the Meiji Era (1868–1912) Japanese statesman, Itō Hirobumi, and his ‘kidnapping’ of a Korean crown prince, Yi Un, in 1907. Itō sought to link the two countries by stamping Japanese imperial prestige and education on the Korean royal family. This was consistent with the late Meiji era ideal of ‘shepherding the people’, by which Imperial Japan’s Home Ministry exercised its mandate ‘to cultivate the energy of the people in support of the state’. They did so by controlling the media and sponsoring campaigns to encourage ‘political realignment’ (*tenkō*).¹⁵ The entire Japanese population were not prisoners, of course, but *tenkō* tactics were exacted on those who did not toe the state line.

Japanese scholar Tsurumi Shunsuke defined *tenkō* as ‘the forced transformation of one’s thought by the authorities in power’.¹⁶ Other scholars have likened the goal of *tenkō* to a process to take an individual and have them ‘restored to a community supposedly untouched by alienation’.¹⁷ *Tenkō* was originally a juridical term used by the [Japanese] Ministry of Justice before World War II to refer to the renunciation of ‘dangerous thoughts’ (*kiken shisō*) among thousands of leftists suspected of ‘thought crimes’ (primarily communism) under the Peace Preservation Law of 1925. Imperial Japanese laws allowed ‘suspects the opportunity to avoid jail or receive a commuted sentence in return for publicizing their renunciation of their problematic political beliefs’.¹⁸

¹⁴ See Jan Kiely, *Compelling Ideal: Thought Reform and the Prison in China, 1901–1956* (Yale University Press, 2014); and Sheldon Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds: The State in Everyday Life* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Roger H. Brown, ‘Shepherds of the people: Yasuoka Masahiro and the new bureaucrats in early Showa Japan’, *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, 35:2 (2009), p. 287.

¹⁶ Tsurumi Shunsuke, ‘Jōgen: Tenkō no kyōdō kenkyū ni tsuite’, in Shisō no Kagaku Kenkyūkai (ed.), *Kyōdō Kenkyū Tenkō*, vol. 1 (Heibonsha, 1959), p. 5.

¹⁷ Irena Hayter and Mark Williams, ‘Introduction: Tenkō – Modernity, empire, Japan’, in Irena Hayter, George T. Sipos, and Mark Williams (eds), *Tenkō: Cultures of Political Conversion in Transwar Japan* (Routledge, 2021), p. xxi.

¹⁸ Adam Bronson, *One Hundred Million Philosophers: Science of Thought and the Culture of Democracy in Postwar Japan* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2016), p. 164. Note, however, that violent persuasion was not applied to prisoners across the board. Japanese POW camps for Germans during WWI were famous for their warm hosting in ways that previous and subsequent POW camps could never imagine. See Naoko Shimazu, ‘Globalising captivity: “Little Germany in China” in Japan’, in Rotem

Japan's defeat did not actually put an end to such conversion practices. We should note that Japanese were forcibly repatriated back to their main islands and not allowed to travel abroad (unless they did so secretly or with special approval) until the nation regained its sovereignty in 1952, suggesting that the United States' programme to 'democratise' Japan after surrender may also have been an exercise in mass incarceration and thought reform, albeit along more democratic lines. Japanese political theorist Maruyama Masao concurred by highlighting how the media was used to reshape Japan. Maruyama suggested that 'thought reform for intellectuals starts with the conversion of the media and journalists'.¹⁹ He was talking about wartime responsibility and that post-war the media pledged to only report the truth, as opposed to its having caved in to government and military pressure previously to publish exaggerated war details or false information that cajoled the population to support imperial expansion and war.

The dilemma of international law in East Asia

The irony of thought reform policies in East Asia was that they started to multiply and strengthen precisely at the same time that newly formed and reformed governments were attempting to gain international credibility by advertising their relatively fresh legal credentials. The Chinese Nationalist Party, a member of the nascent United Nations Security Council, strongly supported the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in December 1948. The USSR was less inclined since the declaration failed to include rights that guaranteed housing, health care, and other items sacred to the Soviet cause. Soon after, in August 1949, the Geneva Conventions became a barometer on which to base international policy decisions. The deployment of these rules for the proper treatment of civilian and military detainees had an unexpected consequence: 'In 1949, American diplomats used international legal vocabulary to objectify and justify the deployment of a global ideological vision for the preservation of Western values against the Communist threat'.²⁰ Taiwan and the PRC would also struggle to come to terms with these new interpretations because such rules ran counter to their expanding indoctrination and propaganda programmes.

Article 17 of Geneva Convention IV specifically deals with captivity and disallows states to inflict 'physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion' on prisoners of war, and prisoners 'who refuse to answer may not be threatened, insulted, or exposed to any unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind'.²¹ It would be difficult to define how captives of the ROC or PRC were not coerced because thought reform was certainly rarely voluntary. This dilemma of how the KMT and CCP wished to portray themselves on the international stage and the reality faced by prisoners at the local level remains a stumbling block for contemporary mainland Chinese scholarship.²²

A noteworthy 2015 article in the *Journal of the Party School of the Central Committee of the CPC* reinterprets the CCP treatment of Japanese POWs by tying it to the notion of PRC support for human rights. The co-authors opine that western scholarship takes the attitude that justice means following the law precisely, which they label 'legalism'. By contrast, the Chinese trials of Japanese war criminal prisoners were a marriage of political thought and legal logic, meaning that sometimes law needs to adapt to political concerns.²³ But this scholarship begs the awkward question

Kowner and Iris Rachamimov (eds), *Out of Line, Out of Place: A Global and Local History of World War I Internments* (Cornell University Press, 2022), pp. 181–201.

¹⁹ Maruyama Masao, *Jikonai taiwa: san satsu no nōto kara* (Misuzu shobō, 1998), p. 45; Rikki Kersten, *Democracy in Postwar Japan: Maruyama Masao and the Search for Autonomy* (Routledge, 1996).

²⁰ Olivier Barsalou, 'Making humanitarian law in the cold: The Cold War, the United States and the genesis of the Geneva Conventions of 1949', *IIJ Emerging Scholars Paper*, 11 (2008), p. 4.

²¹ *The Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949*, p. 88 (full PDF of the conventions at the ICRC website), available at: <https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/external/doc/en/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-0173.pdf>, accessed 10 May 2025.

²² Binxin Zhang, 'China and international humanitarian law', in Ignacio de la Rasilla and Congyan Cai (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of China and International Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), p. 304–5.

²³ Zhu Liyu and Xiong Kan, 'Xinzhongguo chuli riben zhanfan de chengong jingyan ji zhongguo dui guoji renquan shiye de zhongyao gongxian – guodu sifa de shijiao', *Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao xuebao*, 19:5 (October 2015), pp. 16–17.

of human rights, since these prisoners were detained for more than a decade. Instead, prevailing Chinese scholarship holds that because Japanese prisoners changed their ways and came to acknowledge their war crimes, after having been ‘devils’, this process should be seen as the embodiment of a human rights programme and therefore be considered legal. Crafted over decades, this interpretation goes further. It articulates that ‘in the early years after its establishment this is new China’s important contribution to protecting Asian and world peace and the cause of international human rights. And at the same time, it was also for the current international society a sufficiently important effort to put into practice key theories and a system of transitional justice.’²⁴ The same scholarly analysis makes no mention, however, of the many cases of non-Japanese prisoners and whether their thought reform came under the banner of treasuring human rights.

Asia as a geographic site for the contest of ideologies

In the pre-war period, Japanese leftists were frequently detained before committing any crime, in what the government labelled as ‘preventative incarceration’. Abroad, the imperial Japanese military encountered thought reform campaigns of a different nature. During World War Two, both the KMT and the CCP established camps for surrendered Japanese soldiers who were reprogrammed to detest Japanese imperialism and to support the Chinese resistance. Many of these Japanese had been taken prisoner while injured but were treated well in an attempt to convince them that the Chinese were not cruel. Captured Japanese commented about the process of reformation. As children they had been brought up with the goal to be imperial soldiers, and to die for their country. If captured, they were of the mindset that they would be killed or should commit suicide to atone for such shame. Thus, few had the skills or training to deal with the situation of being a prisoner for very long. Not long after his capture, Japanese soldier Kobayashi Minoshichi attempted suicide numerous times by biting his tongue and hanging himself, but he never succeeded. He repeatedly asked his captors: ‘if you are planning on killing me, why not just get it over with, please’. The Chinese guards asked, ‘why do Japanese all want to die so quickly’. Kobayashi declared it was due to their ‘Yamato spirit’.²⁵ Over time, men like Kobayashi began to listen to the anti-Japanese propaganda foisted on them, and some even joined an ‘alliance to oppose the war’ (*hansen dōmei*), a group of former Japanese soldiers organised by Japanese leftist Kaji Wataru.

At Yanan, the wartime CCP stronghold in northwestern China, similar reform camps, under the leadership of Japanese Communist Party leader Nosaka Sanzō, flourished and featured several platoons of former Japanese soldiers who disseminated anti-imperial propaganda to persuade their fellow military brethren to lay down their arms and accept that the real enemy was Japan’s military-industrial clique. These Japanese were technically POWs and not captured for thought reform. But since they could not return to their units, they underwent their own psychological renovation. Under the tutelage of Kaji and Nosaka, surrendered Japanese soldiers formed propaganda troops for both sides of the Chinese political spectrum to encourage more Japanese soldiers to surrender.

Chinese nationalist (KMT) use of ‘self-renovation’

The KMT did not only attempt to re-educate Japanese prisoners. Chinese Nationalist leaders had a long history of chasing and decimating the CCP on the mainland, starting in 1927 with the ‘purging the Party movement’. From the later 1920s through the 1930s, Chiang Kai-shek issued decrees declaring communist thought counter-revolutionary and therefore subject to oppression and detention. These were moves designed to eradicate communist cells within the KMT and to ‘clean up’ the party. At first, however, the KMT permitted CCP members who did not occupy high administrative posts and had not contravened counter-revolutionary laws to admit their guilt and

²⁴Zhu and Xiong, ‘Xinzhongguo chuli riben zhanfan de chenggong jingyan ji zhongguo dui guoji renquan shiye de zhongyao gongxian – guodu sifa de shijiao’, p. 16–17.

²⁵Kikuchi Kazukata, *Nihonjin hansen heishi to nitchū sensō: jūkei kokumin seifu chiiki no horyo shūyōjo to kanrensasete* (Ochanomizu shobō, 2003), pp. 223–5.

move on. However, unlike Japan's *tenkō* initiatives, Chinese communists held by the KMT were often less targets of reform and more targets for assassination. These movements were relatively effective, keeping the membership of the CCP low and mainly off the main political stage until the undeclared war heated up with Japan by the late 1930s.

But there were also parallels to Japan's social suasion. Wang Caiyou describes the KMT's nearly decade-long experiment of reformatories (*ganhuayuan*) for surrendering non-KMT soldiers and political prisoners in areas it controlled on the mainland. These reformatories, originally based on western programmes for the education of amoral juvenile delinquents, changed tack after the KMT aimed to purify the party. Chiang Kai-shek established new reformatories, euphemistically labelled 'academies for self-examination' (*fanxingyuan*), to house a wide variety of prisoners, including political ones, from the late 1920s. Once the KMT widened its sole focus on military victory in its domestic crusade against the CCP to realising the equal importance of grasping the hearts and minds of the peasants through propaganda, it began to focus more on getting CCP soldiers to lay down their arms. Towards that end, reformatories became increasingly important to showcase the KMT's legal approach to thought reform. They believed reformed captives who eventually returned home from the battlefield would support the KMT cause.²⁶ Most detainees sent to such sites in the early years of the 1930s were CCP or other political party prisoners, or from unaligned groups. They were separated into three categories: surrendering prisoners, those taken as prisoners, and those in need of self-reflection. Surrendering prisoners who laid down their arms and came willingly were treated the best and so forth down the line. Those who needed 'to reflect' were often stalwart communists. Women were among the prisoners but mostly housed in the 'academy for self-reflection'.

Education was offered to assist the detainees to reform, and it started with basic literacy classes for the majority of illiterate peasants. In general, the goal was to get those incarcerated to change from fighting for class struggle to fighting for their nation, and to urge them to support the KMT's sacred text of the *Three Principles of the People* over competing ideologies such as Marxism or Soviet beliefs.²⁷ Essentially, these efforts all ended in 1938 with all-out war on the Chinese mainland and the united CCP–KMT front against imperial Japan.

The KMT's 1949 retreat to the island of Taiwan following its defeat in China's civil war marked a further turning point. The Chinese Nationalists could no longer afford the luxury of merely eradicating the opposition in their new limited geographic position; the ruling elite needed more flexible ways of coordinating complicity with the millions of Taiwanese who had grown up under Japanese dominion. The KMT's campaigns did not find initial success and exploded in the massive crack-down of the '2.28 Massacre', during which tens of thousands of Taiwanese were killed over a period of months, starting on 28 February 1947. Just before the Korean War exploded in the summer of 1950, the ROC had declared martial law and increased public suppression, now the responsibility of Chiang Kai-shek's son, Chiang Ching-kuo.

Taiwan's detainees were subject to thought reform and ideological conversion. The 1950s witnessed the establishment of formal re-education centres (prisons) for political prisoners in Taiwan. The KMT leadership harboured the same fear of opposition that it faced on the mainland during the late 1920s to early 1930s, but it could no longer assassinate with impunity, although such cases did exist. Instead, efforts at thought reform activities grew to gain support of the former Taiwanese colonial population and those who had escaped from the mainland with the KMT.²⁸ Police repression did not just rely on the threat of violence; psychological pressure also increased on detainees to recant their beliefs. Such psychology was labelled as 'self-renewal' (*zixin*), and those pressed to

²⁶Wang Caiyou, 'Kangzhanqian guomindang zhengzhifan ganhua zhengce de fenxi – yi nanchang xingying linshi ganhuayuan wei ge an', *Zhengda shicui*, di19qi (December 2010), pp. 9–10.

²⁷Wang, 'Kangzhanqian guomindang zhengzhifan ganhua zhengce de fenxi', p. 17.

²⁸Dominic Meng-Hsuan Yang, *The Great Exodus from China: Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Modern Taiwan* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

do so were leftist political party members as well as those who supported Taiwanese independence from KMT rule.

The KMT employed 'self-renovation', another way to translate *zixin*, as a method to remove communist or counter-revolutionary ideas from urban settings in the late 1920s, but this format once again arose as a political tool after 1949. Contrary to the example of Japanese *tenkō* cases, those who were pushed through KMT reformation were not promised any quid pro quo that harassment would end once they publicly recanted.²⁹ The KMT-styled 'self-renovation' management did not appear to have come with the same post-conversion security blanket of reincorporation back into the society, as offered by imperial Japanese authorities.

By the time the Chinese Nationalists settled in for long-term rule on Taiwan, the KMT was no longer accepting recantations at face value. To prove their conversion was worthy, prisoners had to spy on and reveal secrets about their fellow detainees and report any underground activities they knew about to help further crush any cells that promoted communist ideals or independence goals.³⁰ While the Japanese had practiced 'preventative detention' for many communists, the KMT held many actual trials, though at times these were just for show. Part of the training for political prisoners was not only to recalibrate their belief systems but also to pressure them to be adherents to the KMT and then fight to retake the mainland, the KMT's cause celebre after the 1949 defeat.³¹ Such education included singing patriotic songs. Confessions were also important but seemed secondary to how the CCP prized them.³² Prisoners had to study the *Three Principles of the People*, Sun Yat-sen's recipe for Chinese democracy, and other patriotic education. Basically, those incarcerated had to prove their psychological conversion to be released, through a sort of exam, even when their sentence was complete!³³ Another difference with KMT thought reform policies was that on Taiwan the military or related agencies generally controlled the thought reform prisons. In Japan, it had mainly been civilian-run prisons and the legal system that created the *tenkō* phenomenon, although the military police (*kempeitai*) frequently intervened.

Thought reform detainees were housed in what were labelled as 'New Life Guidance Facilities' (*xinsheng xundaochu*).³⁴ After having created prisons for political prisoners soon after taking over Taiwan, a larger and more formal structure on Green Island was expanded from a pre-existing detention facility established by the imperial Japanese for vagrants, or members of organised crime gangs. For the ROC the goal of such reform centres was, as evidenced in the lyrics of patriotic and educative songs the inmates had to sing each morning, to 'awaken them from their illusions', 'depart from the darkness and go toward the light', and, ironically, to help them realise they were living a 'new life in democracy'.³⁵ Given the fear that communists or spies would overrun Taiwan, these issues were considered as matters of national security, and the military operated the facilities. At the height of the Korean War, KMT fear of the communist enemy was palpable, even on the remote prison island. And in many ways the Chinese Nationalist conversion tactics were sometimes even more physically brutal than the Chinese communists', or even the Japanese ones. An epochal event of defiance within the Green Island prison in 1953 led to fourteen prisoners being sent back for a second trial to a military court in Taipei to face charges of 'rebellion'. They had refused 'voluntary' tattooing of slogans such as 'oppose the communists and resist Russia' on their bodies. This move

²⁹ Reto Hofmann, 'What's left of the right: Nabeyama Sadachika and anti-communism in transwar Japan, 1930–1960', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 79:2 (2019), pp. 403–27.

³⁰ Hsieh Pei-shan, 'Guomindang zixin zhengce yu zixin ren yuan' (MPhil diss., National Taiwan University, 2015), p. 16.

³¹ Isabella Cheng, 'Saving the nation by sacrificing your life: Authoritarianism and Chiang Kai-shek's war for the Retaking of China', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 47:2 (2018), pp. 55–86.

³² Hsieh, 'Guomindang zixin zhengce yu zixin ren yuan', p. 65.

³³ Liu Mingxian, 'Zhengzhifan sixiang gaizao – baise kongbu shiqi ganhua jiayu chutan', *Tongshi luncong*, di 21qi (June 2018), pp. 65–6; Cao Qinrong, Lin Fangwei et al. (interviewers and eds), *Liumagou shiwuhao: ludao nusheng fendui ji qita* (Shulin chuban, 2012), pp. 126–7.

³⁴ A contemporary and less literal translation would be 'New Life Correction Center'. This prison was managed by the Agency of Corrections within the Ministry of Justice (法務部矯正署).

³⁵ Liu, 'Zhengzhifan sixiang gaizao – baise kongbu shiqi ganhua jiayu chutan', p. 65.

had been part of the prison guards' attempts to further motivate the prisoners in the One Man One Cause – Save the Nation with a Good Conscience movement.³⁶ The urge to tattoo was modelled on parallel events happening in Chinese prisoners of war camps at the southern tip of the Korean peninsula.³⁷

Sites for the incarceration, renovation, and collection of intelligence were numerous throughout Taiwan during the first several decades post-war when the KMT was attempting to establish its dominance. Competing detention sites also operated under the aegis of the Ministry of Justice's Investigation Bureau. One of the first was the Dalongdong Detention Center, where Zeng Yongxian was held in 1952 for just over a year. Zeng had been educated in Japan and joined the communists. Returning to his native Taiwan, he continued his underground movement to destabilise KMT rule and press for independence. In his memoirs, Zeng claims that his detention centre experience was 'relatively relaxed' and 'humane', in comparison to those run by the military or the Taiwan Provincial Security Command (*Taiwansheng baoan silingbu*). At Zeng's site, guards and prisoners even ate their meals together at the same table.³⁸

Zeng is a fascinating example of this more persuasive and less heavy-handed self-renovation in Taiwan. After a year in detention, he ended up joining the Investigation Bureau, where he remained until his retirement in the 1990s. According to Zeng, the initial stages of his detention pressed the prisoners into discussions with each other or those led by security members. They were then sent back to the countryside to encourage other underground members to defect. In the final stages they returned to the detention centre in Taipei; they were handed police investigation files suspected of being baseless and requested to evaluate them for errors. One egregious example of police overstepping boundaries and charging innocent people involved a vegetable seller in Yunlin County, in southwestern rural Taiwan. Because it was rumoured that the vegetable seller could channel spirits, many flocked to him. The seller had gotten into some dispute with a police informant, who then labelled the vegetable seller a communist, and he was taken to the police garrison. Zeng was given charge of getting to the bottom of the mystery after the salesman was about to be charged in military court with political sedition. Ultimately, the charges were found to be specious. Years later, when Zeng saw the salesman, he said the seller was grateful for having avoided five to six years of what would have been a sentence of hard labour. Interestingly, Zeng recalls that in charge of his 'self-renovation' was none other than Chiang Ching-kuo, who, Zeng wrote, was a '*tenkō*' person himself.³⁹ After all, the younger Chiang was well known in the late 1920s for having abandoned the Trotskyist line after Trotsky was labelled as a reactionary by the party and purged.

Thought reform of suspected enemy agents, Taiwanese civilians, and actual underground communists was not insignificant in immediate post-war Taiwan. The KMT's era of 'white terror' (*baise kongbu*), as it came to be known, peaked in the first half of the 1950s, but it remained a constant until martial law was lifted on the island in 1987. Although accounts are not complete, from 1950 to 1955 14,000 people were detained as political prisoners on Green Island, the prison-cum-thought reform camp the KMT managed off the eastern coast of Taiwan. In the close to forty years of martial law, more than 100,000 individuals were implicated in some way in a mix of proceedings, and more than 3,000 were executed.⁴⁰ The KMT's ultimate goal was resoundingly dissimilar to what Japanese war criminal prisoners said of their lives in the CCP-managed Fushun War Criminals Management Center (prison) in the north of China, where they, too, had been shown how to lead a 'new life' (*xinsheng*). The Chinese Communist thought reform campaigns of the Japanese were

³⁶ Hsieh Ying-Chung, 'Ludao xinsheng xundaochu chenhua "zaipanluan" yanjiu (1953–1955)', *Taiwan wenxian*, 72:2 (June 2021), p. 125.

³⁷ Shen Xingyi, *Yiwan siqian ge zhengren: hanzhan shiqi 'fangong yishi' de yanjiu* (Guoshiguan, 2013). Oral testimony about this from former Chinese POWs can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4XxCXxCPNg>, accessed 3 December 2025.

³⁸ Zeng Yongxian, *Cong zuo dao you liushinian: Zeng Yongxian xianxiang fangtanlu* (Guoshiguan, 2020), p. 113.

³⁹ Zeng, *Cong zuo dao you liushinian*, pp. 116–18.

⁴⁰ Lin Hsiao-ting, *Jiang jingguo de taiwan shidai: zhonghua minguo yu lengzhanxia de taiwan* (Yuanzu xinshu, 2021), p. 57. See also Wang, 'Kangzhanqian guomindang zhengzhifan ganhua zhengce de fenxi', pp. 1–44.

successful to the point that former Japanese prisoners returned decades later to thank their former guards. Such amity rarely developed within KMT thought reform efforts.

CCP thought reform: A variety of targets

While the KMT was sometimes torturing its citizens but also attempting to mobilise mass opinion to retake the Chinese mainland during its oppressive reign on Taiwan, CCP plans concerning how to co-opt its detainees continued to evolve. In part, this was due to the large numbers of KMT soldiers who surrendered as China's civil war turned in the Communist's favour from 1945 to 1949. As mentioned above, the CCP had already taken a proactive and positive approach to Japanese POWs during WWII, calculating that assimilation rather than rejection would assist their oppressed military brethren to overcome their imperial ways. Growing out from the original plan to treat prisoners well as a way of winning over the enemy, by 1946 the CCP faced larger problems about how to 're-educate' fellow Chinese prisoners of war who were not a foreign enemy. The aim was to incorporate these Chinese 'traitors' into the communist armed forces with their weaponry intact, if possible.⁴¹

CCP thought reform instilled a form of 'learning' to be a better person. Former KMT special agent Wu Kexin recalled how, while housed as a 'war criminal', he and other detainees were told: 'We here are a university, and we are like the school directors. Here you are the students whose main goal is to reform your thinking.'⁴² As CCP manuals and pamphlets on 'new learning' and conversion made clear, Chinese society after 1949 was to be based on Marxist–Leninism–Maoist thought where working for the people was the highest goal, and democratising life was essential.⁴³ But this reform was also a tedious process.⁴⁴ In the words of one former Chinese prisoner who submitted to constant Communist interrogation, it was 'not so much a matter of *outwitting* the interrogator as of *outlasting* him'.⁴⁵

Another major difference with other Chinese systems of thought reform and Japan's was that the PRC system was mainly extra-legal since the majority of former KMT officers, Manchukuo, and Mongolian officials who were exposed to thought reform were never actually charged with crimes. This plan also deviated from the CCP policies towards the post-1949 Japanese prisoners of war whom the Chinese communists investigated for years in their attempt to demonstrate that the PRC embraced international legal procedures. KMT prisoners of the Chinese Communists were mainly detained and then pressed psychologically to convert. CCP leadership treated Japanese war criminals differently, even though on the level of thought reform they underwent similar experiences.

Why thought reform and not show trials for KMT prisoners of the CCP?

Imperial Japan, the KMT, and the CCP each required confessions, but none fetishised it as much as the CCP did. Following the Soviet lead, the Chinese communists adopted the use of confession to signal a mental break with past behaviour. It could also be employed as a historical weapon to both educate and threaten subsequent generations.

⁴¹ Qin Chengjie, 'Rongfu: xinshi zhengjun yundongzhong "jiefangzhanshi" sixiang gaizao yanjiu', *Dangshi yanjiu yu jiaoxue*, 2 (2016), pp. 14–24.

⁴² Wu Kexin, 'Wozai zhanfan guanlisuo de pianduan huiyi', *Chaling wenshi*, di3ji (Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshanghuiyi chalingxian weuiyuanhui, 1987), p. 225.

⁴³ Pang Dunzhi, *Zenyang gaizao sixiang* (Qishi chubanshe, 1951).

⁴⁴ William C. Bradbury, Samuel M. Meyers, and Albert D. Biderman (eds), *Mass Behavior in Battle Captivity: The Communist Soldier in the Korean War* (University of Chicago Press, 1968), especially the section of Wang Tsun-Ming's interview, pp. 121–59; Chang Cheng, 'Cong "guojun" dao jiefangjun: zhiyuanjun zhanfanzhong qian guomindang guanbing de sixiang gaizao jingli', in *Huadong shifandaxue shehuizhuyi lishi wenxian yanjiuyuan zhongguo dangdai yanjiu zhongxin* (ed.), *Zhongguo dangdai yanjiu*, vol. 4 (Huadong shifandaxue, 2023), pp. 239–45 (for internal reading only, not publicly published).

⁴⁵ Office of Armed Forces Information and Education, Department of Defense, *The U.S. Fighting Man's Code* (US Government Printing Office, 1959), p. 50.

Both Soviet and Chinese confessions symbolically destroy the old man in order to reconstitute a new man, one able to cast off his previous self. But in the show trial format, the individual stands accused of capital crimes; hence no amount of penitence can efface his criminal accountability. In this way, the trial form embodies the vehicles of nihilation, whereas the thought reform structure contains its therapeutic, integrative character.⁴⁶

Chinese policies to return soldiers who had confessed and changed their ways to the military developed further, as detailed by Wu Zhige in his 1941 treatise on treating prisoners well.⁴⁷ Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong both believed in such procedures, not only for the fact that it served as effective propaganda for Chinese moral ideals but because it also recruited talent into poorly educated and weakly trained militaries. The Soviet goal to craft a utopian socialist body aimed to ensure that the individual was secured to a 'feeling of belong to the state, of being a particle (a "cog") in the state machine, a member of the collective'. Ultimately, this policy strove to create a new man, a *homo sovieticus*, a refined *homo sapiens*.⁴⁸ As Andrew Mertha notes, Chinese leadership had similar goals. 'It has long been a governing imperative in China for the leadership to not simply seek to maintain its power, but to consistently and conscientiously endeavour to transform society.'⁴⁹ Strangely, imperial Japan took the opposite view from the 1930s onward, even regarding its own soldiers. Once they departed from their home troops, even if they had been ill or unconscious when surrendering, Japanese soldiers were considered tainted and not welcomed back into the fold.

During the Korean War, the CCP introduced further conversion and thought reform tactics on KMT soldiers who surrendered or had been taken as prisoners towards the tail end of China's civil war. These views reflected both a pragmatic and ideological stance. On the one hand, given the weak state of the PRC's military affairs and precarious national situation in its early years, the PLA could ill afford to alienate or disregard the tens of thousands of KMT prisoners and soldiers who crossed over to surrender. As General Wang Xinting noted, the CCP needed to respect Mao Zedong's dictum of '*baoxialai*' ('taking over responsibility') for surrendering or captured KMT troops. The CCP could not let such troops disperse, for doing so risked allowing them to regroup and resist Communist rule later, or to be used by the KMT enemy.⁵⁰ Notwithstanding CCP rhetoric about building a new China and Mao's proclamation of victory in October 1949, the periphery of China was still subject to KMT machinations and faced being overthrown at any moment until the early 1950s. It would take years until the CCP felt confident in its national legitimacy. In the meantime, the CCP developed policies to convert and reform KMT soldiers that rested on political awareness campaigns requiring endless small group meetings for instruction, confessions, and self-criticism.⁵¹

Confessions were also tricky since the men often did not completely grasp what was expected. The process and teams involved Japanese as well as KMT prisoners and were generally implemented by the same guards through the same processes and at the same Fushun Prison. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Japanese psychiatrist Noda Masaaki began interviewing former Japanese war criminals who had confessed and investigating their psychological makeup and their confessions' long-term impact on their mental health. At Fushun, former imperial Japanese army First Lieutenant Kojima

⁴⁶ Ernest Clark, 'Revolutionary ritual: A comparative analysis of thought reform and the show trial', *Studies in Comparative Communism*, 9:3 (Autumn 1976), p. 240.

⁴⁷ Wu Zhige, *You dai fulu zhengce* (Guomin tushu chubanshe, 1941).

⁴⁸ Mikhail Heller, *Cogs in the Wheel: The Formation of Soviet Man* (Alfred A Knopf, 1988), pp. 5–6.

⁴⁹ Andrew Mertha, "Stressing Out": Cadre calibration and affective proximity to the CCP in reform-era China', *The China Quarterly*, 229 (2017), p. 67; Joseph W. Esherick, *Accidental Holy Land: The Communist Revolution in Northwest China* (University of California Press, 2022), p. 204; Huang Daoxuan, 'A Xinling History of the Rectification Campaign', PRChistory.org, available at: <http://prchistory.org/huang-daoxuan-a-xinling-history-of-the-rectification-campaign/>.

⁵⁰ Wang Xinting, *Wang Xinting huiyilu* (Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2008), p. 369.

⁵¹ Chang Cheng, "Xinzhongguo" de pantaozhe – hanzhan fangong zhanfu de shengsi taowanglu, 1950–1954', in Zhang Jishun and Ishikawa Yoshihiro (eds), *Jitihua shidai de zhongguo: ri-zhong gongtong yanjiu* (Toyo Bunko, 2021), pp. 63–103.

Takao had grown more frustrated with the process of self-reflection and writing out confessions. He was continually criticised for writing what he believed would please his guards and grew more confused about what was the truth of what had happened and what he thought they wanted to hear so that he could be freed. When he was eventually allowed to write letters home, they too also became the object of critique because he had praised his warm surroundings without speaking about himself to his family. Only in 1955 was Kojima finally able to fully recall and write up his more than one-hundred-page confession.⁵² However, Noda explained that this important confession, which the CCP so greatly cherished, did not complete Kojima's psychological journey. On the surface, most prisoners understood the gravity of the crimes but their real process of acknowledging their past came only when they repatriated to Japan and encountered 'normal society' once again. One element in thinking about how to judge the value of a confession or its link to human rights could be to consider how the Japanese soldiers (and this would hold true for other captives who had committed real war crimes, not necessarily those being detained for political reasons) came to change their opinions of their actions. They came to understand that those whom they had oppressed were 'people' and no longer just considered them as 'things.' In that regard, thought reform was also an effective means for former soldiers to reclaim their humanity because they could now exude empathy and recognise the impact their actions had on others.⁵³

Thought reform of detained Manchukuo royalty

In a rather chilling exegesis on the need for 'killing' counter-revolutionaries or war criminals in March 1956, Minister of Public Security Luo Ruiqing explained to an audience of officials that during the movement to quash counter-revolutionaries they killed many in a 'mountain of blood debts' (*xuezhai leilei*). But to kill war criminals would not satiate public anger since it had already mainly cooled, and the prisoners had been incarcerated for so long. Luo added that amnesty or release was also possible but the prisoners had to have been judged, or have demonstrated that they had 'worked on reforming themselves.'⁵⁴ The core question was how to judge that conversion. Most Japanese war criminals had already been released by 1956, but KMT detainees would not be deemed ready for entry back into Chinese society until 1959 and the start of Mao's amnesty proclamations. The former last emperor of Manchukuo, Pu Yi, was among the first important amnesties Mao conducted on the tenth anniversary of the nation's new founding. He was released from Fushun Prison in late 1959.

The PRC state press closely monitored the joy of those released Chinese and Manchukuo detainees but ignored their personal relationships and the role they played in their conversions. The conditions in which political conversion took place while in detention took a definitive turn in post-war Communist China when the CCP recognised the importance of keeping key figures like former Manchukuo Emperor Pu Yi alive and emotionally stable. Hundreds of prominent KMT war criminals, along with members of the Japanese imperial military, were sequestered at the Fushun War Criminals Management Center in former Manchukuo from the summer of 1950. Family members of the incarcerated Japanese were eventually permitted to visit their loved ones, highlighting the CCP's humane treatment of the Japanese as a supposed key ingredient to their abandonment of imperial loyalty. For most KMT prisoners this was not an option. Building on this success, women in the Manchu royal family became pawns in a parallel process. Li Yuqin, former Qing Emperor Pu Yi's fourth wife, became a role-playing prisoner for the CCP political machine. In 1955, after a decade of separation, Pu Yi managed to get in touch with Li, and she visited Fushun Prison. CCP authorities wanted her to be responsible for Pu Yi's declining morale since the former emperor was depressed. Prison officials redesigned a spacious prison cell with a large double bed in anticipation

⁵²Noda Masaaki, *Sensō to zaiseki* (Iwanami shoten, 2022 [1998]), pp. 124–8.

⁵³Interview with Dr. Noda Masaaki, Kyoto, 10 April 2025.

⁵⁴Luo Ruiqing, *Lun renmin gongan gongzuo, 1949–1959* (Qunhong chubanshe, 1995), pp. 279–80. This was at a 14 March 1956 meeting of the National People's Congress Standing Committee.

of their new conjugal prison life.⁵⁵ Authorities pressured her to remain married, but Li wanted a divorce. Due to the Communists' change in the marriage law, she was now able to file directly for divorce. She remarried soon after.⁵⁶

In the latter half of 1961, Mao Zedong invited several Hunan provincial comrades as well as Pu Yi to his residence in the main government compound of Zhongnanhai and queried whether Pu Yi was still unmarried. Premier Zhou Enlai took an interest and in April 1962 the former last emperor married a nurse, Li Shuxian.⁵⁷

Despite their efforts at treating Japanese war criminals well, by the late 1950s Sino-Japanese political relations were on the skids, so the potential roles for Manchurian elites as a bridge to Japan gained significance.⁵⁸ Japanese Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke visited Taiwan in 1957, in an obvious snub to mainland China. Other events that soured relations soon followed. Pu Yi's younger brother, Pu Jie (granted amnesty in late 1960), had also been incarcerated in Fushun but was married off in 1937 to a Japanese noble, Saga Hiro. She had repatriated to Japan several years after the war's end. A series of intricate political machinations eventually allowed Saga to return to China at a time when the countries had no diplomatic relations, revealing just how important her presence was believed to be to keep Pu Jie in good spirits but also to advance Sino-Japanese relations. Premier Zhou was convinced that reuniting Pu Jie and Saga would assist in carving out a new pathway for the resumption of the stalled Sino-Japanese political relations.

Pu Jie's journey from being the Manchukuo emperor's younger brother and Japanese imperial officer to PRC citizen did not end with his release from prison. Like *tenkō* converts currying favour with the Japanese state, Pu Jie would serve the Beijing government and, importantly, so would his wife, to increase positive links with Japan. Getting Saga back to China was important enough that Premier Zhou entrusted his first invitation letter to long-time Japan hand Wu Xuewen. Wu had been an undercover soldier enrolled in the Manchurian Military Academy during the war and then served the CCP after 1945. A second invitation was physically handed to Saga in Japan by Ding Xuesong, who later became China's first female ambassador. Ding recounts how Vice Minister of the International Liaison Department, Liao Chengzhi, instructed her of the importance of this national mission, telling her to make sure to hand it to Saga herself and to welcome Saga back to China to live together with her family.⁵⁹ Several letters and visits from other Chinese dignitaries kept up the pressure on Saga, who was already keen to reunite with her beloved Pu Jie.⁶⁰

Premier Zhou Enlai, with the assistance of key interlocutor for Sino-Japanese relations Liao Chengzhi, orchestrated the repatriation process. Chinese leaders assessed that Sino-Japanese relations looked potentially salvageable with Japan's massive demonstrations against Prime Minister Kishi's force-fed security alliance with the United States in 1960. Demonstrations in Japan were raucous but so was parallel discomfort in the major cities of China, where the *People's Daily* trumpeted that six major Chinese cities saw enormous rallies of one million or more. Chinese

⁵⁵Barak Kushner, *Geography of Injustice: East Asia's Battle Between Memory and Justice* (Cornell University Press, 2024), p. 215.

⁵⁶Zhang Jicheng (ed.), *Fushun zhanfan guanli jiuuzhi lieguan gushi* (Nanjing chubanshe, 2014), pp. 143–6.

⁵⁷Hsiao Decai (ed.), 'Weidai huangdi de hunshi', *Wuhan wenshi ziliao zongji* 26, *Gandanpian* (tales of courage), di4ji, (1986), pp. 38–9.

⁵⁸Sugiura Yasuyuki, 'China's "Japan neutralization" policy and its perception of Japan's circumstances: The case of the divide and rule policy toward the LDP in "the age of discontinuity" in Japan-China relations', *Security & Strategy*, 2 (January 2022), pp. 51–77; Sugiura Yasuyuki, 'Sengo no nihon no seiji shidōsha (1) chinichiha Shū Onrai no jitsuzō: kenkoku shoki kara nicchū kokkō seijōka made no chūgoku no tainichi seisaku to tainichi kōsaku', *Hōyū*, 40kan 1gō (May 2014), pp. 2–28.

⁵⁹Ding Xuesong (Yang Dehua zheng li), *Zhongguo diyiwei nudashi Ding Xuesong huiyilu* (Jiangsu renmin, chubanshe, 2000), p. 77; Aishin Kakurahiro, *Ruten no ōhi no shōwashi* (Shinchōsha, 1992), p. 258.

⁶⁰Motōka Noriko, *Ruten no ko: saigo no kōjo Aishinkakura Kosei* (Chūō kōron shinsha, 2011), pp. 230–1.

headlines announced: ‘support the Japanese people in the struggle to oppose a US–Japan military treaty’. Many believed this change would lead to the feared resurgence of Japanese militarism.⁶¹ Here was the perfect moment for Premier Zhou to find a lever to realign Sino–Japanese relations.

In February 1961, Liao Chengzhi invited Pu Yi, Pu Jie, and other family members to discuss rebuilding the royal family with Saga. Family members encouraged Pu Jie to write to Saga and explain that he had been pardoned and for her to return to China. But Pu Jie did not write a letter at first because his elder brother, Pu Yi, opposed it. Pu Yi claimed that he detested Japanese imperialism, believed Saga to be a spy, and completely distrusted her because she was Japanese. Pu Jie countered that while he could understand this stance, his brother could not fathom Pu Jie and Saga’s mutual love. Zhou Enlai came to the rescue and, according to Pu Yi’s autobiography, ‘corrected the family’s misunderstanding of the situation.’ Zhou invited the extended former royal family to his state home on the former grounds of the Forbidden City (*Xihuating*) for dinner and discussions concerning how to remedy the situation. The invitees spoke for almost two hours about bringing Saga back and their emotions. All the while Pu Yi stressed his adamant opposition. It was lunar New Year’s Eve, so Zhou postponed the discussion and they ate, vowing to restart discussions. After dinner Zhou asked, is China not big enough to accept Saga? If she returns, ‘two things are possible: one is that she and Pu Jie live in happy harmony, establish a lovely home and this is a good thing. The other possibility is that they grow disappointed and that she makes her return to Japan.’ But to make this a successful jaunt, Zhou emphasised, the whole family needed to help Saga go through a process of transformation and accept China, since she was from a different culture.⁶² In the early 1960s, Zhou was busy with state affairs, so the hours he spent on this matter underscores his belief of the potential importance this relationship held for Sino–Japanese relations. After all, conduits between the two countries were scant. Saga returned to China in May 1961.

Not long after, in June 1961, Zhou invited Saga and the extended Manchu royal family, along with numerous other key Japanese and Chinese guests to the heart of the CCP government, for a grand afternoon lunch.⁶³ The meal lasted five hours. This strategy was part of a long tradition of using hospitality as the means to persuade foreigners of China’s true intentions.⁶⁴ Zhou admitted that they might have heard rumours in Japan that things were currently difficult in China. Responding to himself, he said, ‘it is true that the famine has meant our crop yield “has decreased a bit” but after two years of effort the situation has greatly recovered.’ (This was, in fact, a lie and China suffered greatly for years due to the disastrous Great Leap Forward and subsequent famine.)⁶⁵ Zhou chatted with his guests and told them that he hoped they would live happily together but as equals. Japan, too, he reminded them, had royalty in the past but that should no longer be considered good. Pu Yi was the last emperor but we will not call him the former emperor of Manchukuo because we do not recognise that history, Zhou explained. He then informed Saga that she was welcome to try residing in China and later could return to Japan if she liked. Should she come back to China, Zhou assured her she would not require his additional written permission. Zhou turned to the guests and prophetically announced that their marriage of a Chinese and Japanese couple was a symbol of Sino–Japanese friendship. At the end, Zhou welcomed Pu Jie’s

⁶¹ ‘Zhichi ribenrenmin fandui rimeijunshi tiaoyue de douzheng’, *Renmin ribao* (16 May 1960). Wu Xuewen discusses this moment in *Zhongri guanxi chule shenme wenti* (*Zhuo Nansheng duitanlu*), (Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2005), p. 10.

⁶² Quanguo zhengxie wenshi he xuexi weiyuanhui (ed.), *Pu Jie huiyilu* (Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 2012), pp. 182–5.

⁶³ Quanguo zhengxie wenshi he xuexi weiyuanhui, *Pu Jie huiyilu*, pp. 191–2.

⁶⁴ Julia Lovell, ‘The uses of foreigners in Mao-era China: “Techniques of hospitality” and international image-building in the People’s Republic, 1949–1976’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, 25 (2015), pp. 135–58.

⁶⁵ Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958–1962*, trans. Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012); Frank Dikotter, *Mao’s Great Famine: The History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–62* (Bloomsbury, 2010).

Japanese wife and stated that he hoped she could help promote Sino–Japanese relations and restore diplomacy.⁶⁶

At that luncheon Zhou also expounded on how the CCP saw Chinese history and politics. Zhou ‘stated that the Qing emperors and a small number of nobles were responsible for China’s decline, but the Manchu people, who had suffered in the same disasters as other ethnic groups, were not’. Zhou pointed out that Pu Yi could not be responsible because he had been too young. ‘Zhou insisted, however, that Pu Yi and Pu Jie were responsible for Manchukuo, although the Japanese took the larger part of the blame.’⁶⁷ Zhou further expounded on the harm Japanese imperialism had wrought on China but that moment ‘was already in the past’. He added that China and Japan needed ‘to look forward and should diligently promote good relations between the two countries, restore diplomatic relations, and expand economic and cultural links.’⁶⁸

Conclusion: National trust and national security

Robert Moeller reminds us that the citizens of many states have ‘transformed their pasts into public memory’.⁶⁹ We have shown here how this was a central feature of twentieth-century politicised captivity in the KMT, CCP, and, to a lesser extent, in Japan. In each case, thought reform assisted in the production of a public memory, a useable past that could bolster national security and consolidate political legitimacy. Thought reform was always linked to the larger goal of revolution, be it imperial Japan’s, a Chinese nationalist variety, or a Chinese communist one. The role of thought reform was always the same: Conversion focused on convincing individuals that their old beliefs had withered on the vine and were no longer useful to a ‘modern’ society. Renovating the individual was the first step in transforming the larger society and making it more secure. Those who did not buy into the revolutionary zeal of transforming their society were a threat and thus needed to be changed.

Certainly, part of this transformation was dealt with by violence, but not always. The authorities often realised that co-opting the opposition could be more effective in the long run. As Mao, himself, pointed out in his seminal April 1956 speech, ‘The Ten Major Relationships’, killing did not always lead to correct political change and might cause more problems for the revolution in the long run.⁷⁰

The three groups analysed in this article were competing for the same results – stability and security – with similar coercive means. Japan used the threat of preventative captivity to coerce domestic opponents and imperial subjects alike. The KMT programmes used violent incarceration combined with the heavy hand of psychological conversion. The PRC, following the Soviet lead at first, practiced ideological conversion of detainees, often without resort to the legal pursuit of a trial. After 1949, these practices would turn greater China into a gladiatorial stage for national legitimacy.⁷¹

But coercive pressure often alternated with persuasion, and both were often administered together. By the post-war, a third category mechanism came to the fore: propaganda. Prisoners

⁶⁶These are available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/zhoulilai/index.htm>, accessed 25 March 2025. Originally taken from 《周恩来选集》下卷接见嵯峨浩、溥杰、溥仪等人的谈话(一九六一年六月十日).

⁶⁷Shao Dan, *Remote Homeland, Recovered Borderland Manchus, Manchoukuo, and Manchuria, 1907–1985* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), p. 206. Quanguo zhengxie wenshihexuexi weiyuanhui, *Pu Jie huiyilu* (Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 2012), pp. 192–3.

⁶⁸Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi (ed.), *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976 (zhonghuan)*, (Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1997), p. 416.

⁶⁹Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (University of California Press, 2001), p. 20.

⁷⁰Mao Zedong, *Lun shida guanxi* (25 April 1956). The full Chinese text is available on the Chinese communist material store house, the ‘Zhongwen makesizhuyi wenku’, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/marxist.org-chinese-mao-19560425.htm>, accessed 2 April 2025.

⁷¹Nagatomi Hirayama, ‘Records of enemies and puppets: Qingcha Diwei Dang’an Xiaozu Dang’an and modern Chinese historical research’, *Twentieth-Century China*, 45:3 (October 2020), po. 369–77.

previously had disseminated propaganda but had not been part and parcel of it. From 1945, as the Chinese civil war heated up, and then as the Korean War dominated regional security concerns from 1950 to 1953, the propaganda value of converting the incarcerated-POWs, war criminals, and/or counter-revolutionaries could not be ignored. Thought reform provided a visual display of revolution and change, propaganda that used the reform of detainees as a form of 'exhibitionary culture'. As China's contemporary calls for 'correct history' prefigured at the start of this article, conversions help authorities craft new historical narratives that 'project state power', which, when reflected in official history, could become part of 'authorized knowledge'.⁷²

While the PRC mastered this technique and continues to practice forms of it today, it was not foreign to neighbouring regimes in Japan, Taiwan, and even Korea. Propaganda creates a mirage of consensus. And thought reform, depending on how it is executed, helps society grasp history, or at least to bend to its salience and retain its political shape.⁷³

The verdict concerning whether any of these efforts at thought reform across East Asia were successful 'on net' remains ambiguous. Certainly, trust or often fear of the new central government underpinned effective state management. But did the people who were incarcerated actually believe what they were pressed to espouse? Most former Japanese war criminals investigated by the PRC maintained their belief that they had been 'reborn' during their communist captivity. But other well-known individuals who initially recanted returned to their initial beliefs. One prominent example was Itagaki Tadashi, son of imperial Japanese Army General Itagaki Seishiro. In 1950, the younger Itagaki was enthusiastic as a newly released former soldier when he testified in the Japanese parliament about his detention experience in Siberia. At a special Diet committee, Itagaki stated that due to the Soviet efforts his eyes were opened to democracy and the necessity of having a people's government, not an emperor-cantered one. He later dropped these beliefs and became a vocal opponent of the treatment he experienced in the USSR.⁷⁴ Huang Wei, the long-suffering KMT military officer who believed that he never recanted his loyalty to Chinese Nationalism goals, was finally released from Fushun Prison in northeast China in 1975. Years later, when writing his memoirs and asked about the length of time thought reform and political conversion took, he replied, '27 years!'⁷⁵ This was precisely the length of his incarceration.

The capacity for the state to spend precious time and resources on reforming individuals suggests deeply held ideological and political values are at stake. Deeper questions remain, but the problem of captives and how to deal with them during regime change remains a highly pertinent topic for East Asian security – particularly because they continue to entangle Japan, China, and Taiwan. This research will therefore continue to assess how practices of thought reform might further develop across East Asia.

Epilogue

In the late autumn of 2025, when it appeared that Japan would have its first female prime minister, Takaichi Sanae, Chinese President Xi Jinping made a short press announcement.⁷⁶ As it

⁷²Denise Ho, *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao's China* (Cambridge University Press 2017), p. 4. Ho is not talking about POWs as propaganda, but I think her theoretical framework fits in nicely.

⁷³Office of Armed Forces Information and Education, *The U.S. Fighting Man's Code*; Walter K. Richardson, 'Prisoners of war as instruments of foreign policy', in Richard B. Lillich and John Norton Moore (eds), *The Use of Force, Human Rights and General International Legal Issues*, International Legal Studies 62 (US Naval War College, 1980), pp. 325–42, available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/ils/vol62/iss1/>.

⁷⁴Sherzod's Muminov, 'From imperial revenants to Cold War victims: "Red repatriates" from the Soviet Union and the making of the new Japan, 1949–1952', *Cold War History*, 17:4 (2017), pp. 432–3; National Diet, House of Representatives, 7th Congress, Special Investigative Committee Session 24, (12 April 1950).

⁷⁵Barak Kushner, *Geography of Injustice: East Asia's Battle Between Memory and History* (Cornell University Press, 2024), pp. 210–12.

⁷⁶'Xi says China ready to work with Japan to build constructive, stable bilateral relations', November 1, 2025, available at: https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202511/01/content_WS69054593c6d00ca5f9a073b0.html#:~:text=Xi%20said%20that%20China%20is%20ready%20to,and%20third%20party%20markets%20%20%20**Promoting%20people%20Dto%20Dpeople%20exchanges**}, accessed 27 February 2026.

does at times of administrative change in Japan, the PRC government emphasised history and the Taiwan issue. Such declarations relate to the four major agreements Japan and the PRC have signed since 1972, including the key November 1998 accord when Jiang Zemin visited Japan. Along with acknowledging Beijing's position that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China, the third Sino-Japanese accord emphasised the role of facing history as well.

Both sides believe that squarely facing the past and correctly understanding history are the important foundation for further developing relations between Japan and China. [...] The Japanese side is keenly conscious of the responsibility for the serious distress and damage that Japan caused to the Chinese people through its aggression against China during a certain period in the past and expressed deep remorse for this. The Chinese side hopes that the Japanese side will learn lessons from the history and adhere to the path of peace and development.⁷⁷

On one hand, China lauds the Japanese peace constitution but will not tolerate any revision of it because Beijing maintains a public perception that if unleashed, Japanese defence would turn into offence, mirroring their imperialist actions more than eighty years prior. The CCP has locked itself into a one-phase relationship with Japan that cannot adapt to almost a century of change since that time. But circumstances change – Japan is no longer the power in East Asia it was and the PRC is demonstrably both economically and militarily a force that few believed it ever would become.

Perhaps not recognising how much the geopolitical environment had shifted, newly installed Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi proclaimed in November 2025 that a Taiwan emergency would pose an 'existential threat' to Japan. Such a statement provoked immediate PRC wrath because mainland China believes such comments violate Chinese sovereignty and interfere with what they term as internal affairs. However, Takaichi inadvertently also stumbled onto a vexing problem. If China did attack Taiwan and lines were drawn – what would Taiwan's response be? If it declared independence at that moment, how would the world react? Would the PRC risk trying to incarcerate thousands of Taiwanese and put them under surveillance while pressuring them to accept historical education foreign to them? Surely the numbers who would rise in defiance of a Chinese invasion would require such potential programmes. Perhaps not, as times have changed since the thought reform programmes of the 1950s. A senior analyst at the RAND think tank, among others, employs the term 'cognitive domain operations' to signify the PRC's new expected methodology to mollify or gain the psychological support of individuals who oppose its authority. Is this the potential new trend in thought reform?⁷⁸ It is increasingly likely that Beijing has changed tack from yesterday in its former belief in the perfectibility of man. Instead, in the words of one of the main Chinese theorists of the new strategy to dominate the psychological environment, National University of Defense Technology Professor Zeng Huafeng, China will seek to transform the intellectual mind landscape in which the inhabitants live – including the sphere of the media. In the

⁷⁷Japan-China Joint Declaration, On Building a Partnership of Friendship and Cooperation for Peace and Development, available at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/china/nc_sengen.html. English translation from 'The World and Japan Database (Project Leader: TANAKA Akihiko)', Database of Japanese Politics and International Relations, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS), Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia (IASA), University of Tokyo, available at: <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/JPOCH/19981126.D1E.html>, accessed 5 May 2025.

⁷⁸Scott Harold, 'How Would China Weaponize Disinformation Against Taiwan in a Cross- Strait Conflict?', online Rand Commentary (published 15 April 2024), available at: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/04/how-would-china-weaponize-disinformation-against-taiwan.html>; Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 'Cognitive domain operations: The PLA's new holistic concept for influence operations', *China Brief of the Jamestown Foundation*, 19:16, available at: <https://jamestown.org/cognitive-domain-operations-the-plas-new-holistic-concept-for-influence-operations/>, 6 September 2019, accessed 25 November 2025. See also Michael J. West and Aurelio Insisa, 'Reunifying Taiwan with China through cross-strait lawfare', *The China Quarterly*, 257 (2024), pp. 186–201.

PRC estimation, gaining an upper hand within the theatre of the mindscape will provide the military a weapon that has the power to ‘subdue the enemy without battle.’⁷⁹ Thought reform campaigns in East Asia might next be waged not on captives but rather on the mass society at large. Such a move would be a seismic shift from previous practices of pressuring captives to accept a new status quo that had already occurred to implementing pre-emptive moves in advance of action so that targeted communities learn to accept a future before it happens.

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⁷⁹I could not obtain the original interview with Zeng from the People’s Liberation Daily, but it was reprinted online in other venues so I quote from a repost of it on a Sina military news site, ‘Duoqu weilai zhanzheng zhinaoquan’, June 6, 2014, available at {<http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2014-06-16/0350784872.html?from=wap>}, accessed 25 November 2025.