China's Virtual Museum Exhibitions: Presenting Communist History to Foreign Audiences

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by

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Thesis submitted for the Asian Studies Research Master degree
July 14, 2023

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Chapter 1: Introduction

During a visit to the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference in 2013, Chinese president Xi Jinping laid out his approach to domestic and international messaging on China. He advocated for "telling China's story well", for instance through "Wài xuān" [外宣], a term that in this context translates to 'overseas propaganda'.[1] Xi's approach aims to inform people, including those beyond China's borders, on Chinese history, culture and politics in a way that reflects the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) objectives at home and abroad. When done successfully, it would enable the CCP to not only sway the public in its favour, but also to control narratives on China and the Party. One key element in this story is the Party itself. According to members of the government, it is supposed to emphasise the role of the CCP in China's development from a country downtrodden by foreign imperialists, to the global super power it is today.[2] Furthermore, the story should speak to why the CCP is leading the country and why this leadership should be supported.[3]

Xi argued in a letter to the National Museum of China that, in addition to news outlets, museums are one of the most important vessels to tell 'China's story', mostly because they "[promote] exchanges and mutual learning" with people from varying ethnicities, cultures and countries.[4] However, with the COVID-19 global pandemic, this communication tool fell away. Due to the heavy restrictions within and when traveling to the country, people were no longer able to visit Chinese museums in person. In response to these restrictions, many museums developed virtual versions of some of their exhibitions.[5] People interested in Chinese history and culture could therefore continue to be informed about these topics and enjoy a museum

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[1] CMP Staff, "Telling China's Story Well," *China Media Project,* April 16, 2021, https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/telling-chinas-story-well/.

[2] Qiushi Network Review, "Jiǎng hǎo zhōngguó gòngchǎndǎng zhìguó lǐ zhèng de gùshì" 讲好中国共产党治国理政的故事 [Telling the Story of the Communist Party China's Governance], *China Daily,* September 19, 2018, http://china.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-09/19/content_36943860.htm.

[3] Xu Shanna, "Jiāqiáng yìtí shèzhì jiǎng hǎo zhōngguó gùshì" 加强议题设置 讲好中国故事 [Strengthening Agenda Setting and Telling the Chinese Story], *CPC News,* July 21, 2020, http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0721/c40531-31791926.html.

[4] Xinhua, "Xi Jinping on Museums," *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China,* last modified July 11, 2022, http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2022-07/11/content_78316135.htm.

[5] Liu Yang, "Countermeasures Taken by Chinese Museums in the COVID-19 Pandemic Situation and Future Issues," *International Council of Museums Japan,* April 7, 2021, https://icomjapan.org/en/updates/2021/08/07/p-2543/.

experience from the comfort of their homes. The CCP quickly expressed its support for these developments. Advancing the development of virtual exhibitions was listed in China's fourteenth Five-Year Plan (2021-2025). Soon after, nine government departments collectively issued official guidelines and announced financial support to museums to ensure and encourage rapid, high quality development of these online learning environments.[6] Because of these developments, people from China and beyond now have easy and continuous access to CCP-approved narratives on Chinese history and culture through museums, as travel time and costs have been eliminated. In theory, the outreach of these exhibitions, and therefore of the narratives they communicate, have increased tremendously.[7]

This study asks what narratives these new online museum environments present to their foreign visitors about the CCP's rise to power, from the beginning of the Civil War in 1927 until the Party's victory in 1949 that resulted in the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC).[8] It focuses on this history specifically because of the Party's expressed desire to put the CCP at the core of 'China's story'. This study also investigates to what extent the discussed virtual exhibitions can have soft power effects on their foreign visitors. This thesis aims to answer these questions by analysing three virtual exhibitions on Chinese modern history from three different state-owned museums.

1.1 The power of museums

Museums are generally perceived as trustworthy institutions. Their public image, as locations where research is conducted with the goal to educate visitors, often provides them a societal status as institutions dedicated to serving the public. As a result, museums tend to enjoy a relatively unchallenged and yet highly valued position in society.[9] The authority that museums receive from the public enables them to convince audiences of specific narratives, and the usage

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[6] Li Xueqin, "Museums Across China Gather Pace in Going Digital," *People's Daily,* May 14, 2022, http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0514/c90000-10096602.html.

[7] Many Chinese virtual exhibitions include texts that have been translated into English. These translated sections enable English-speaking audiences to learn about the topics on display, thus broadening the exhibitions' outreach beyond Chinese speakers only.

[8] In this thesis, the terms "foreign" and "foreigner" mean non-Chinese.

[9] Sara Tam, "In Museums we Trust: Analyzing the Mission of Museums, Deaccessioning Policies, and the Public Trust," *The Fordham Urban Law Journal* 39, no. 3 (2012): 860-1.

of objects and images further empowers museums to underline the stories they present.[10] Museums are thus extremely persuasive institutions, which makes them powerful tools to promote certain interpretations of history and culture.

The power of museums comes forward in some reviews written by visitors. For instance, a reviewer of the Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution in Beijing, from here on referred to as the Military Museum, writes on TripAdvisor: "After seeing the Military Museum, my first feeling is that I am more patriotic. […] I can see the military strength of our motherland more clearly". The title of this review is especially telling: "Those who offend China will be punished, even if they are far away!"[11] This review shows that the museum's storytelling has evoked a sense of military pride, an effect that the reviewer describes by referencing their improved appreciation for their "motherland's" military and, what seems to be, a sense of invincibility and great national strength. It is thus clear that this museum has had a strong impact on this visitor's perceptions of China. Encountering specific narratives in museums can lead to emotional responses such as the one experienced by this reviewer. These responses might ultimately even motivate people to act, for example to join the military. Presenting specific narratives in museums can thus be highly beneficial for governments to gain and maintain support and, with that, legitimacy.

Soft power strategies like this can also be applied beyond borders, for example to increase international interest in and engagement with a specific country, city or region. The Chinese government is well-known to be concerned with its international image, and has made many, and often strongly debated, attempts to pique foreigners' interest in the country. Think for instance of the Confucius Institutes built around the world that provide courses on Chinese languages, history and cultures. Despite scholars' attention to and awareness of China's soft power strategies as well as academia's current understanding of museums as powerful soft power tools, the narratives presented to foreigners within Chinese museums and their possible effects are yet to be understood. This gap in the literature is worth exploring because foreign audiences are significantly different from domestic ones, especially in authoritarian countries such as China.

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[10] Joyce Apsel, and Amy Sodaro, *Museums and Sites of Persuasion: Politics, Memory and Human Rights* (Milton: Routledge, 2020): 3.

[11] Anonymous, "犯我中华者，虽远必诛！" Fàn wǒ zhōnghuá zhě, suī yuǎn bì zhū! [Those who offend China will be punished, even if they are far away!] Review from TripAdvisor, April 16, 2018, https://www.tripadvisor.nl/ShowUserReviews-g294212-d1793444-r573942379-Military_Museum_of_Chinese_People_s_Revolution-Beijing.html.

Domestic Chinese audiences will encounter the same or similar narratives presented in exhibitions beyond the museum context, for instance in the media which is strictly supervised or owned by government departments. Furthermore, in 1991, the Chinese government established the "Patriotic Education Campaign" to re-educate the public on Chinese history according to contemporary government ideology and objectives. Both schools and museums are part of this campaign that is used by Beijing to glorify the CCP and justify its one-party rule.[12] As a result, the narratives presented within Chinese museums are familiar to domestic visitors. For them, the museum does not only function as an educational institution, where new information or insights are offered, but also as one that perpetuates and affirms that what they already know. On the other hand, foreigners, a term that in this thesis refers to non-Chinese, might enter the museum with opinions or information about the topics on display that do not entirely align with the narratives presented in the exhibitions. At the very least, they will be unfamiliar with some aspects of China's history. Both of these factors can obstruct understanding of or agreement with the presented narratives. It is also important to consider that the Chinese museums discussed in this research are known to have close relations with the Party. This means that visitors, both domestic and foreign, might enter the museums with scepticism regarding the truthfulness of the story presented to them.

Considering the CCP's desire to communicate with foreigners through museums, and its continued attempt to do so by encouraging fast-paced development of virtual exhibitions, understanding how museums engage with foreigners can indicate attempts to connect with this audience. It can also provide insight into what "telling China's story well" entails. This thesis closely analyses all elements of three virtual exhibitions from state-owned museums that have been made accessible to foreign visitors, for instance through translation, in order to decipher what story on China's modern history the CCP wishes to communicate to this audience.[13] In doing so, this thesis also reflects on the fact that this communication occurs digitally. It considers the opportunities and challenges that the virtual exhibitions face in communicating with their visitors and what impact this consequently has in terms of possible soft power effects.

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[12] Zheng Wang, "National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China," *International Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (2008): 784.

[13] It is important to note that some foreign visitors might speak Chinese; they would therefore have access to all content in the virtual exhibitions and not just the translated sections. However, because this thesis aims to understand the presentation of Chinese modern history to foreigners in general, only the sections that have specifically been included in the exhibitions for this audience or that are accessible to those who do not speak Chinese have been considered.

As stated above, the analysed cases in this thesis are all virtual exhibitions. In this thesis, the term 'virtual exhibition' refers to a digitalised museum experience that is offered by a museum to interested parties through the internet. A virtual exhibition can take many different forms, ranging from a Virtual Reality (VR) or first-person point of view tour of an exhibition which can either be entirely unique to the internet or a digital copy of an existing physical exhibition, to an experience operating as an (immersive) addition to an existing physical exhibition. The three cases discussed in this thesis fall in the former category, as they appear to be direct copies of their physical counterparts and enable the virtual visitor to digitally walk through them. Because online museum experiences are still relatively new and quickly developing, not much research has been done on the possible effects of communicating through virtual exhibitions. This thesis therefore contributes to the current academic debate on the obstacles and strengths of virtual exhibitions by considering their possible impact on visitors. This thesis does not, however, aim to discuss what the museums need to change in order to improve their communication with visitors, nor does it aim to provide suggestions for communication strategies or designs that could be implemented in virtual exhibitions. Instead, it intends to discuss the presented story and the communication thereof in its three case studies in order to draw conclusions about these specific cases' possible soft power effects.

1.2 This thesis

This thesis analyses the following exhibitions: "The Road to Rejuvenation" from the National Museum of China, "The CCP-led Revolution" from the Military Museum, and "The Three Victories" from the Nanjing Memorial Hall. In order to gain insight into the narratives that these exhibitions present to their foreign audiences, this thesis conducts a detailed critical discourse analysis on the exhibitions' content that is accessible to visitors who do not speak Chinese.[14] It considers visuals, such as photographs and objects, translated written texts, which are always in English, and other forms of display that do not require knowledge of the Chinese language. The possible soft power effects of the exhibitions and the narratives they present are discussed through an analysis of the communication that occurs through this online medium. The virtual exhibitions' affordances as well as their content will be scrutinised so that observations can be made on how the narratives 'reach' the foreign virtual visitor.

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[14] See footnote 13.

This thesis will begin by discussing academic debates surrounding China's soft power, Chinese museums and virtual exhibitions in order to position this project and provide sufficient context to understand it. This extensive literature review will be followed by an overview of this research's case study selection and methods, before turning to its detailed analysis of the three virtual exhibitions' narratives as presented to foreign audiences. After, a discussion of the communication of these narratives through this online platform will consider the exhibitions' possible soft power effects on their foreign visitors. Finally, a summary and discussion of this thesis' findings will seek to answer the research questions posed above. It will also situate this project in the wider debate on China's soft power strategies and museums.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Memory studies scholars study how groups in society remember and forget history. They often conduct their research through analyses of so-called 'memory carriers', or 'lieux de mémoire', in which memories are preserved and represented. Carriers include specific (historic) sites, museums, traditions, monuments, historical objects, literature and film.[15]

In recent years, International Relations (IR) scholars have begun to show an interest in observing memory-carriers as well. Studying memory can be valuable for IR scholars because "collective memories have long influenced domestic and especially international affairs."[16] In other words, memory can be the motivation behind a society's or group's political moves, norms, values, priorities and beliefs. This means that when one is knowledgeable about a society's or group's memory narratives, they would be able to predict or at the very least understand their political attitudes and aspirations. Bachleitner emphasises how the interpretation of a country's history can shape the behaviour of the state in the international and domestic spheres to a large extent. She argues that it is important to recognise that memory is never static but instead always in motion, as current affairs and academic research might alter people's or the state's perceptions and memories of the past.[17] This idea of 'malleable memory' also comes forward in Hodgkin and Radstone's argument that memory narratives are never truly objective, as different groups in society can have distinctly different memories and interpretations of the same history.[18] Following this understanding, studying memory can offer IR scholars insight into present-day societal norms and values, which group holds a more influential position in society or politics, and changing political needs. All of these elements can in turn be reflected in policy changes on domestic or international levels, thus also impacting those who might not share the specific memory that provoked said policy changes.

Observing China's national memory is a popular research project among memory studies and IR scholars alike. Perhaps this is due to the country's growing power and influence

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[15] Pim Boer, "Lieux de Mémoire – Sites of Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook,* ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 21.

[16] Eric Langenbacher, and Yossi Shain, "Introduction: Twenty-first-Century Memories," in *Power and the Past: Collective Memory and International Relations,* ed. Eric Langenbacher and Yossi Shain (Washington D.C. : Georgetown University Press, 2010): 1.

[17] Kathrin Bachleitner, *Collective Memory in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 3

[18] Katherine Hodgkin, and Susannah Radstone, "Introduction: Contested Pasts," in *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory,* ed. Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (London: Routledge, 2003), 2.

in global affairs and the consequent growing interest in understanding the motivations behind China's international and domestic politics. According to academic literature, the CCP heavily references and promotes certain understandings of history to legitimise and strengthen its leadership. Studying these memory narratives can thus offer insight into the ideology of the Party and why it enjoys popular support. Weatherly and Zhang argue that the CCP actively utilises history to increase nationalistic sentiments, ones that are explicitly interlinked with the Party, through narratives where the CCP is presented as China's liberator from the country's 'humiliating' history of imperialist influences. The CCP therefore not only gains legitimacy from this described legacy, the creation of a national identity and pride based and centred on the Communist Party is also encouraged.[19] As a result, the CCP gains domestic support and manages to play an important role in the identity of many Chinese, which further solidifies the Party's power and influence. Furthermore, as Zheng argues, "history and memory have become institutionalised in political institutions and education systems", meaning that narratives on history are ingrained in society and the government to an extent that "every facet of people's lives [is penetrated]" by it. Narratives on history are thus operating as ideological tools and are used to argue in favour of certain political campaigns and policies.[20]

Considering this described importance of and frequent referral to history for and by the CCP, observing state-sponsored and -supervised memory carriers in which memory narratives are preserved, created and represented, is a truly insightful strategy to grasp state narratives. The following literature review will delve into current academic debates on the CCP's attempts to promote certain narratives about itself and China. Because this thesis focuses on the presentation of memory narratives to foreign audiences in virtual history museum exhibitions, this literature review will explore existing scholarship on the CCP's efforts to connect with foreigners to promote certain narratives abroad, the relations between the Chinese state and historical museums, and the characteristics, benefits and challenges of virtual exhibitions.

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[19] Robert Weatherly, and Zhang Qiang, *History and Nationalist Legitimacy in Contemporary China: A Double-Edged Sword* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 2-3.

[20] Wang, "National Humiliation, History Education and the Politics of Historical Memory," 803.

2.1 Understanding China's soft power strategies

The division of power in the world, and how states negotiate and engage with these power dynamics, is central in IR. Nye defines power as the "ability to get the outcomes one wants".[21] According to his argument, there are two different approaches to obtaining these results. 'Hard power', on the one hand, refers to strategies that ensure desired outcomes through economic or military might. Military threats or economic sanctions can sway another party to change their position on a certain issue. 'Soft power', on the other hand, "rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others" through attraction of culture, political values, and foreign policies.[22]

Multiple academics argue that these definitions are not entirely applicable to the Chinese government's approach to power. Zheng and Zhang, for instance, argue that Nye's proposed clear distinction between hard and soft power is often blurred in Chinese politics, as some hard power strategies have had soft power effects. They offer the examples of China's economic aid to and investments in the African continent as well as China sharing its profits from large-scale economic projects with neighbouring countries. Both of these economic policies have resulted in an increase of positive sentiments among locals towards China, and especially towards the Chinese economic model.[23] Similarly, Zhang argues that Chinese soft power is distinctly different from American soft power, which Nye based his definition on, as "the Chinese origin of soft power could be traced back to Confucius, asserting that a country's influence and attractiveness is gained from how it governs its own state under 'morality/virtue'".[24] Zhang also claims that the Chinese state was initially mostly concerned with utilising soft power strategies domestically rather than abroad. China's attempt to connect with the outside world to improve its international image is thus a new development.[25] This development occurred simultaneously

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[21] Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004): 1.

[22] Ibid., 5-6.

[23] Yongnian Zheng, and Chi Zhang, "Soft Power' and Chinese Soft Power," in *China's Soft Power and International Relations,* ed. Hongyi Lai, and Yiyi Lu (London: Routledge, 2012): 27.

[24] Zhan Zhang, "The Dilemma of China's Soft Power in Europe," in *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds,* ed. Ying Zhu, Joseph Nye, Kingsley Edney, and Stanley Rosen (London: Routledge, 2020): 153.

[25] Ibid., 152.

with the increased presence of China in global politics and economics, a presence which, during Xi Jinping's presidency, has only increased.[26]

This increased presence of China on the world stage has resulted in the emergence and increased popularity of the 'China threat theory' among academics, journalists, politicians and, consequently, the general public (predominantly) in the West. This theory asserts that a rising power such as China will continuously desire more global power and influence. This fear has culminated in a heated debate on whether or not China's enhanced presence in global politics and economics is a threat to the current world order due to the differences between China's political and economic norms and values in comparison to the United States', on which international institutions such as the United Nations are build.[27] Furthermore, some scholars and politicians consider Chinese international aid and development projects to developing countries a strategy to further increase China's influence, establish a certain economic and trade dependency on China, and to enhance China's access to resources in these vulnerable states.[28] China's interactions with other countries are thus closely observed and scrutinised.

Because of this response by scholars and politicians to China's economic and military soft power techniques, Lai argues that it has become "imperative for the Chinese leadership to lessen external concerns surrounding China's rise to power, and China should thus take advantage of its cultural uniqueness [to ease] negative external impressions".[29] Lai considers

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[26] Jarmila Ptáčková, Ondřej Klimeš, Gary Rawnsley and Jens Damm. "Introduction: The Soft Edges of China's Hard Power." in *Transnational Sites of China's Cultural Diplomacy: Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East and Europe Compared,* ed. Jarmila Ptáčková, Ondřej Klimeš, Gary Rawnsley (Singapore: Springer, 2020): 3.

[27] See for example:
Nana de Graaff, Tobias ten Brink, and Inderjeet Parmar, "China's Rise in a Liberal World Order in Transition: Introduction to the FORUM," *Review of International Political Economy* 27, no. 2 (2020): 191-207;

Emma V. Broomfield, "Perceptions of Danger: the China Threat Theory," *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 35 (2003): 265-84;

Valeri Modebadze, "US-China Rivalry for Global Hegemony," *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2020): 167-73.

[28] See for example:
Ivar Kolstad, and Arne Wiig, "Better the Devil You Know? Chinese Foreign Direct Investment in Africa," *Journal of African Business* 12, no. 1 (2011): 31-50;

Denis M. Tull, "China's Engagement in Africa: Scope, Significance and Consequences," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 44, no. 3 (2006): 459-79;

Rhys Jenkins, "Latin America and China – a New Dependency?" *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 7 (2012): 1337-58.

[29] Hongyi Lai, "China's Cultural Diplomacy: Going for Soft Power," in *China's Soft Power and International Relations,* ed. Hongyi Lai, and Yiyi Lu (London: Routledge, 2012): 85.

Buddhism, a religion "known for its peaceful orientation", a cultural element that might succeed in promoting a non-threatening image of China abroad.[30] According to Yildirim and Aslan, the CCP already approaches the West specifically through cultural means because of this persistent scepticism towards the Chinese government. They thus argue that China engages in a more 'defensive' soft power approach in the West, where the protection of China's image is central, whereas in non-Western, and especially developing, countries soft power mostly takes the form of aid and development projects that promote the government and its ideology.[31]

Similar to responses on the development projects initiated by the Chinese government, the steady increase of Chinese cultural soft power strategies is also carefully observed and debated. Throughout the past decades, China has invested in the promotion of Chinese culture, language and history abroad to "assure the world that China is a civilized, responsible and trustworthy nation".[32] Within this cultural exchange, the promotion of China's natural beauties, traditional medicine, arts and philosophy is especially prominent. This often occurs in cultural institutions where events, exhibitions, workshops and lectures on China are provided.

The most infamous example of China's cultural centres are the Confucius Institutes (CIs) that have been established all over the world. The CIs have received much opposition from local governments, journalists and universities alike, and continue to be heavily debated in academics. Lo and Pan argue that it is the close association between party/state and the CIs that results in them being so widely distrusted by academics and politicians. It is because of this close connection, which is not present in international cultural institutions from other countries, that creates the impression of the CIs as propaganda machines.[33] Luqiu and McCarthy show that this impression is enhanced by the perceived influence of CIs on how China is studied and perceived in other educational institutions, such as partnering universities, through close relations with and the provision of scholarships and funds to researchers and projects that centre on CCP-favoured or -approved topics. This would lead to issues of (self)censorship as well as limitations on freedom of speech and publication.[34] Zhou and Luk state that this understanding

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[30] Ibid., 88.

[31] Nilgün Eliküçük Yildirim, and Mesut Aslan, "China's Charm Defensive: Image Protection by Acquiring Mass Entertainment," *Pacific Focus* 35, no. 1 (2020): 164.

[32] Lai, "China's Cultural Diplomacy", 85.

[33] Joe Tin-yau Lo, and Suyan Pan, "Confucius Institutes and China's Soft Power: Practices and Paradoxes," *A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 46, no. 4 (2016): 526.

[34] Luwei Rose Luqiu, and John D. McCarthy, "Confucius Institutes: The Successful Stealth 'Soft Power' Penetration of American Universities," *The Journal of Higher Education* 90, no. 4 (2019): 640.

of CIs results in the institutes' failure to contribute to Chinese soft power. They argue that these cultural institutions actually have a negative effect because of their perceived aggressive nature, which in turn can lead to more intense 'China threat' sentiments.[35]

Other scholars, mostly those who focus on the establishment of CIs in non-Western countries, also consider the positive effects of the CIs. A recurrent finding of these scholars is that, contrary to the aforementioned arguments, local authorities and students positively view the CIs. Repnikova, for example, points out how the CIs in Ethiopia have successfully combined "practical and tangible benefits with language and cultural promotion", which has led to beneficial results for not just China's reputation in the African country, but also for the universities and students.[36] Other scholars, such as Paradise, critically assess the arguments made in scholarship by arguing that the possible influence of the CIs on academics and public opinion tends to be overstated. According to him, cultural promotion alone is not powerful enough to sway the public into forgetting about larger, often reported on, geopolitical issues that involve China.[37]

Though the establishment of CIs is a rather obvious example of the CCP's attempts to educate and interest foreigners in China, academics also debate China's engagement in other, perhaps more subtle, soft power strategies abroad. For example, the Chinese government's presence in media is a hot-topic. Becard and Filho argue that the increased presence of China within global news agencies through large-scale investments has greatly improved China's soft power, as it provides the government an opportunity to "tell the Chinese story to the world and diminish the difference between its self-image and the world's perception of China".[38] Other researchers argue that the Chinese government is also actively using Western social media platforms to spread certain narratives on controversial contemporary issues such as the repression of and human rights violations against the Uyghurs, or to divert the public's attention

[35] Ying Zhou, and Sabrina Luk, "Establishing Confucius Institutes: a Tool for Promoting China's Soft Power?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100 (2016): 641.

[36] Maria Repnikova, "Rethinking China's Soft Power: "Pragmatic Enticement" of Confucius Institutes in Ethiopia," *The China Quarterly* 250, no. 1 (2022): 458.

[37] James F. Paradise, "China and International Harmony: The Role of Confucius Institutes in Bolstering Beijing's Soft Power," *Asian Survey* 49, no. 4 (2009): 664.

[38] Danielly Silva Ramos Becard, and Paulo Menechelli Filho, "Chinese Cultural Diplomacy: Instruments in China's Strategy for International Insertion in the 21st Century," *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 62, no. 1 (2019): 5.

away from these issues by promoting other elements of Chinese society and politics instead.[39] Other scholars focus on the presence and influential role of the Chinese government in entertainment industries. For example, the hefty government investments into the Chinese film industry are generally understood as a strategy aiming to ensure a positive portrayal of Chinese history, culture and contemporary society. The fact that this portrayal is brought to international audiences in an entertaining fashion is incredibly beneficial, as it can reach a wide audience.[40]

Another heavily debated soft power strategy is the Chinese government's investments in local cultural heritage sites and the upkeep and restoration thereof, the most well-known of which are related to the international history of the Silk Roads. In doing so, the Chinese government is able to encourage ideas of 'shared history' between the Chinese and local populations. This helps to create interpersonal bonds and sentiments of mutual understanding, to promote and increase awareness of and appreciation for Chinese history, and to ensure the presence of narrative elements abroad that correspond to the CCP's narratives and objectives. Furthermore, the effort made to protect cultural heritage would signify that the Chinese government shares values with multiple states, values that are also promoted through international organisations such as UNESCO.[41] Common ground would consequently be established, and any lasting effects of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) on China's reputation in regards to its appreciation for and approach to cultural heritage can be negated.

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[39] See for example:
Gary King, and Jennifer Pan, `How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument,` *American Political Science Association* 111, no. 3 (2017): 484-501;

Albert Zhang, and Tilla Hoja, "Assessing the Impact of CCP Information Operations Related to Xinjiang," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute,* policy brief report no. 62, 2022, https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2022-07/CCP%20information%20operations.pdf?VersionId=de5x3zJVoULx0zGnr_gCHxlFWt7BwdA2.

[40] See for example:
Antonios Vlassis, "Soft Power, Global Governance of Cultural Industries and Rising Powers: the Case of China," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 22, no. 4 (2016): 481-2;

Michael Keane, Mark David Ryan, and Stuart Cunningham, "Worlds Apart? Finance and Investment in Creative Industries in the People's Republic of China and Latin America," *Telematics and Informatics* 22, no. 4 (2005): 317.

[41] See for example:
Ryoko Nakano and Yujie Zhu, "Heritage as Soft Power: Japan and China in International Politics," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 26, no. 7 (2020): 870;

Michael J. Storozum, and Yuqi Li, "Chinese Archaeology Goes Abroad," *Archaeologies* 16, no. 2 (2020): 282;

Tim Winter, "Heritage Diplomacy Along the One Belt One Road," International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter 74, Summer 2016, https://www.iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/heritage-diplomacy-along-one-belt-one-road.

In short, among academics there is a general consensus that the Chinese government hopes to awaken a certain interest in or admiration for Chinese history, politics and culture abroad. Considering scholars' critical observations of these Chinese soft power strategies, it is surprising that attempts to connect with foreigners through Chinese museums remain undiscussed. This is especially so today, as the development of virtual exhibitions has improved peoples' access to museum experiences. In academia, museums are generally considered powerful institutions that can alter peoples' perceptions and opinions, as they are "active agents in the construction of knowledge" because they not only present, but also create narratives.[42] Schultz argues that museums have the ability to convey certain interpretations of history or culture that "reflect and convey ideologies" whilst presenting these interpretations as 'truths' through storytelling via objects and other materials that can function as 'proof'.[43] The social status that these museums enjoy, as trusted educational institutions, further enhances the museums' ability to inform their visitors and to play an important role in convincing them of the displayed information.[44] Their possible soft power effects should thus not be overlooked.

Furthermore, the existing literature's focus on the international promotion of Chinese culture leaves a big gap when it comes to understanding the promotion of China's modern history and politics. According to scholars who research international public opinion on China, China's reputation abroad is mostly shaped by political topics, such as the Communist Party, and, more recently, the government's treatment of minorities and its response to social unrest, trade disputes and the Covid-19 pandemic. These scholars found that, especially in the West, China's reputation has worsened over the past decades due to these domestic and international issues.[45] This means that the reputation of the Chinese government is obstructing cultural

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[42] Stephanie Moser, "The Devil is in the Detail: Museum Displays and the Creation of Knowledge," *Museum Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (2010): 22.

[43] Corey Kai Nelson Schultz, "Museums, Affect and Soft Power: The Harbin Jewish Museum," in *China's International Communication and Relationship Building* ed. Xiaoling Zhang, and Corey Schultz (London: Routledge, 2022),165-6.

[44] See:
Tam, "In Museums we Trust," 860-1;

Apsel and Sodaro, *Museums and Sites of Persuasion,* 3.

[45] See for example:
Liu Kang, "Interests, Values, and Geopolitics: the Global Public Opinion on China," *European Review* 23, no. 2 (2015): 242-60;

Stephen Rowley, *European Perceptions of China and Perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative,* Leiden: BRILL, 2021;

promotion abroad. Additionally, as Lo and Pan describe, the high demand in countries all over the world to study the Chinese language and culture is mostly linked to China's economic success and growing influence on the world stage.[46] Many people are thus willing to learn about China out of a desire to better understand this growing power, which is a political and/or economic motive, and not because they have a deep interest in or appreciation for Chinese culture per se. This means that if the CCP succeeds in promoting Chinese politics abroad, foreigners interested in Chinese politics and economics would gain a CCP favoured understanding of these topics. How the CCP approaches communicating about China's political history and contemporary politics is therefore not only very telling of how the Party wishes to portray itself, it is also worth exploring because of its possible impact on foreigners' perceptions of the Party.

Xi's ambition to 'tell the Chinese story well' indicates that the CCP is actively attempting to alter this negative, politically charged international reputation through narratives on China's government. And yet, analyses of these soft power strategies are missing in today's scholarship. This thesis aims to fill this observed gap in the literature by closely examining the narratives on China's leading Party that are presented to foreign audiences in museums that have been developed under the strict supervision of and in accordance with the CCP.

2.2 Understanding Chinese museums

There is a clear general consensus in academic books and articles on Chinese museums: the state is omnipresent.[47] Kirk Denton was one of the first scholars to delve into the relations between the state and museums across China. He argues that Chinese history museums directly demonstrate attempts from the state to shape a certain historical narrative, which in turn indicates attempts to create a national identity - one desired by the state.[48] Denton explores multiple museums and their relations with the state in order to substantiate this argument. An

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Laura Silver, Kat Delvin, and Christine Huang, "Unfavourable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries," *Pew Research Centre,* October 6, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/.

[46] Lo, and Pan, "Confucius Institutes and China's Soft Power," 526-7.

[47] Because this thesis focuses on history museums, this review only discusses literature on Chinese history museums.

[48] Kirk Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China* (Honolulu: University Press, 2013), 3.

example is his discussion on the Military Museum, of which an exhibition will also be analysed in this thesis. Denton emphasises that this museum was commissioned by Mao Zedong himself in order to gain support for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and to enhance military culture.[49]

Other scholars who have researched Chinese museums have drawn similar conclusions. Academics seem to agree that the state is the most important factor in the development of not just museums, but also of national memory *through* museums. Varutti, for example, describes in her work how multiple municipalities have rapidly established new museums in the last decade. This development coincides with China's "ideological crisis", referring to China's capitalist successes that "fostered a mounting disenchantment with Communist ideals".[50] As a result, the CCP was in need of means to justify and secure its power, which is why a memory narrative that centres on a positive and heroic representation of the Party and the PLA was created and promoted.[51] Zhang and Courty's argument aligns with Varutti's. They describe Chinese museums as political instruments used to "control culture and legitimise power", a conclusion they draw from their finding that most new museums depict a "representation of the past that takes account of the recent identity changes caused by massive economic and social reforms".[52] This observed political objective of museums is not new, as under Mao's leadership museums were established for "mass education and mass mobilisation" purposes. The history presented within them therefore followed a propaganda-based narrative.[53] Lu underlines this in her book, where she argues that establishing museums has been a strategy employed by the CCP from 1949 onwards "in order to serve the economic, ideological and political needs of the Party and the state".[54]

Many scholars clearly perceive the Chinese government as an actor that assumes an active and extremely influential role within museums, thus enabling the government to influence the creation of narratives on and the depiction of history to a large extent. This,

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[49] Ibid., 121.

[50] Marzia Varutti, *Museums in China: The Politics of Representation After Mao* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2014), 2.

[51] Ibid., 3-4.

[52] Fenghua Zhang, and Pascal Courty, "The China Museum Boom: Soft Power and Cultural Nationalism," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 27, no. 1 (2021): 31.

[53] Denise Y. Ho, *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao's China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1-3.

[54] Tracey Lie Dan Lu, *Museums in China: Power, Politics and Identities* (London: Routledge, 2015), 117.

combined with the consensus that museums tend to serve as propaganda tools to promote the CCP's leadership, results in academics' notion that museums and the Party are deeply intertwined. However, there appears to be one clear difference between the arguments presented by the above discussed scholars and Denton. Whereas Denton explicitly articulates that he wants to introduce the role of the state in museums in a "state/people equation", referring to the idea that state narratives on memory are not only everchanging but also influenced by the general public,[55] the other scholars fail to include such disclaimers. As a result, readers might be under the impression that the Chinese state is in full control of shaping and creating national memory narratives.

As previously stated, memory narratives are the result of interpretations of history. Any narrative on history is consequently intertwined with contemporary norms, values and needs. Furthermore, different groups within one society, be it based on gender, age, religion or ethnicity, can experience and remember the same historic event in an entirely different manner.[56] Memory is therefore often debated within democratic societies, as different groups are given the opportunity to voice their interpretations of a specific historic period or event, at least to a certain extent. Memory can become contested when these different narratives do not align.[57] In authoritarian states, this freedom to present certain interpretations of the past is limited, and the state tends to play an active role in shaping and promoting a specific understanding of history through, for instance, education and media. Nonetheless, it would be incorrect to assume that the CCP is in full control of memory, especially in such an ethnically diverse and massive country as China. At most, the state is able to control the 'official' narrative that is for example promoted in textbooks, movies and literature through means such as censorship, and through state-owned or heavily supervised educational and informative institutions such as universities, news outlets and museums. In short, society will always shape and impact memory narratives to a certain degree, as the promoted narrative must in some ways resonate with the people to be accepted. Because this thesis aims to analyse the narratives that the CCP wishes to present about itself, it focuses on state-owned museums only, where relations between museum and state, and therefore presented memory narratives and state, are very close. It acknowledges that the memory narratives presented in the exhibitions are the result of both

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[55] Denton, *Exhibiting the Past,* 4-5.

[56] Diana Lary, "War and Remembering: Memories of China at War," in *Beyond Suffering: Recounting War in Modern China,* ed. James Flath, and Norman Smith (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011): 270.

[57] Hodgkin, and Radstone, "Introduction: Contested Pasts," 2.

state efforts and independent public memory. However, because the state played an active role in the development of the observed exhibitions, this thesis argues that the narratives within are state-approved and thus represent and follow the interpretation of history that the CCP wishes to promote abroad.

In most published works on Chinese museums, scholars pose similar research questions. The majority of scholars research Chinese exhibition narratives in terms of their link to national identity and its creation. For instance, in his article on the representation of World War II in museums across China and Japan, Hatch argues that there is a consistent and coherent narrative presented in all of the analysed Chinese museums, which according to him has contributed to the creation of one national identity. Hatch also points out that this identity aligns with the CCP's current ambitions in the international sphere and that it can therefore be "effectively mobilised in global affairs".[58] Vickers describes similar findings. He found that Chinese museums emphasise the country's and, more specifically, the CCP's victory over the Japanese colonisers. He argues that this presented narrative disregards the "history of division and conflict within [China's society]", which implies that memories are deliberately simplified and generalised in order to establish a consistent narrative on history applicable to all Chinese.[59] Shelach-Lavi found that this strategy is not only employed in relation to modern history, where the CCP is an actor, but also to ancient history presented in archaeology museums. This history too has become an element in "the standardised narrative of Chinese history", where deep connections between the past and the present are central, and this narrative has been successfully promoted to such an extent that, despite China's ethnic diversity, Chinese history and culture is now generally accepted to be "a monolithic entity".[60] As Varutti explains, museums are used as tools to "substantiate, sustain and disseminate" a specific notion and understanding of a Chinese national identity, one that emphasises unity.[61] Establishing such a unifying narrative is beneficial for the Chinese state, as it can enhance sentiments of nationalism and patriotism, which in turn can influence Chinese society's support for the state and its domestic and international policies. Scholars wishing to understand Chinese society and politics

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[58] Walter Hatch, "Bloody Memories: Affect and Effect of World War II Museums in China and Japan," *Peace and Change* 39, no. 3 (2014): 367.

[59] Edward Vickers, "Transcending Victimhood: Japan in the Public Historical Museums of Taiwan and the People's Republic of China," China Perspectives 2013, 4 (2013): 27-28.

[60] Gideon Shelach-Lavi, "Archaeology and Politics in China: Historical Paradigm and Identity Construction in Museum Exhibitions," *China Information* 33, no. 1 (2019): 38-39.

[61] Varutti, *Museums in China*, 3-4.

might therefore be drawn towards topics such as the creation and enhancement of national identities through Chinese museums.

However, similar to the effects on a domestic audience, the presentation of a country's history to foreigners through museums might alter how the country and its history are perceived abroad. Exhibitions on the CCP might even influence this audience's attitudes and opinions on the Party and its leadership. The current domestic focus in scholarship on Chinese museums might originate from the idea that gaining support of one's own population is the priority of any state, as it can prevent and resolve domestic regime security challenges.[62] Though this is an extremely valuable angle from which to investigate memory narratives, it is important to understand that regime legitimacy is also challenged by international factors. The absence of a discussion on museum narratives geared towards foreigners is thus regretful and also rather surprising considering that other Chinese international soft power strategies are controversial and have been widely studied and researched. Furthermore, the Chinese government is very open about using museums to disseminate specific narratives abroad. President Xi proclaimed that the establishment and promotion of museums is meant to educate people on China and to "[contribute] to the construction of a positive image of [China] and its people".[63] This quote demonstrates that the Chinese state is actively and openly pursuing soft power strategies that centre on educating foreigners on China, and particularly on creating a more positive image of the country among this international audience. Despite this being well known, scholars fail to consider Chinese museums as propaganda tools that exceed domestic relevancy and purpose. This thesis aims to analyse the presentation of Chinese Communist history within Chinese museums to foreign audiences specifically. The recent efforts by Chinese state-owned museums to digitalise a selection of their exhibitions only further demonstrates the efforts made to reach and educate a broad audience on China. Studying the narratives promoted to foreigners is thus more relevant than ever before.

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[62] Kingsley Edney, "Building National Cohesion and Domestic Legitimacy: A Regime Security Approach to Soft Power in China," *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): 269.

[63] Shuai Wang, "Guójì hànyǔ jiàoshī rúhé jiǎng hǎo zhōngguó gùshì" 国际汉语教师如何讲好中国故事 [How can International Chinese Teachers Tell Chinese Stories Well?], *People's Daily,* August 2, 2018. http://media.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0802/c40628-30192367.html.

2.3 Understanding virtual exhibitions

The role, reputation and, consequently, design of museums has developed and changed drastically over the years. According to Hudson, museums first emerged during the seventeenth century. Their sole purpose was to collect, conserve and study objects. Museums therefore only served researchers and the wealthy. This changed in the twentieth century; museums began to be considered as institutions that serve the public. The foremost objective of the museum was no longer to house and safeguard collections, but to cater to and educate the people.[64] Today, a museum's main goal is still to communicate with and inform visitors, though the objectives to collect and preserve objects remain.[65] According to Mateos-Rusillo and Gifreu-Castells, museums have recently progressed to yet another development stage. They argue that "neither the object (the collections) nor the subject (the public) are of primary importance. What matters most is the relationship established between the two".[66] These academics consider the inclusion and increasing presence of technologies, including the development of virtual exhibitions, an important element of this new stage. Virtual exhibitions fulfil the same objective of informing visitors that physical exhibitions do, the only difference being that it occurs through online and technological means.[67]

Carreras and Mancini delve into the history of virtual exhibitions and describe that in the late 1990s, with the development of the internet, curators and archivists were quick to see their potential to document, especially temporary, exhibitions. In the early 2000s, technology rapidly developed, and so did virtual exhibitions. The scholars emphasise that these exhibitions initially mostly served as an addition to or promotion of physical exhibitions, whereas today some are replacements of physical visits.[68] The development of information and communications technology (ICT) is thus an opportunity for museums and other cultural institutions alike to unite themselves and their collections with society through the enhanced accessibility and opportunities for interactivity and entertainment that virtual exhibitions offer.[69]

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[64] Kenneth Hudson, "The Museum Refuses to Stand Still," *Museum International* 50, no. 1 (1998): 43.

[65] Soyeon Kim, "Virtual Exhibitions and Communication Factors," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 33, no. 3 (2018): 243.

[66] Santos M. Mateos-Rusillo, and Arnau Gifreau-Castells, "Museums and Online Exhibitions: a Model for Analysing and Charting Existing Types," *Museums Management and Curatorship* 32, no. 1 (2017): 41.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Cesar Carreras, and Federica Mancini, "A Story of Great Expectations: Past and Present of Online/Virtual Exhibitions," *DESIDOC Journal of Library and Information Technology* 34, no. 2 (2014): 89-90.

[69] Mateos-Rusillo, and Gifreau-Castells, "Museums and Online Exhibitions," 41.

Despite these positive takes on virtual exhibitions, some museums might have reservations regarding the development of digital versions of or additions to their exhibitions. Urbaneja describes that some curators are under the impression that online exhibitions will lead to a decrease of people physically visiting and paying for their visit to the museum. Furthermore, some curators might not understand the added benefit of online exhibitions, for instance because many virtual exhibitions currently follow "the archetypical space of the museum's galleries", meaning that they are direct copies of the 'real thing' and therefore do not provide a unique experience.[70] Another reservation can be the cost for the development and upkeep of these digitalised exhibitions. This is an especially prominent concern considering that museums often grapple with tight budgets.[71] Many Chinese museums do not face this latter obstacle. Zhang and Courty found that most museums in China operate almost entirely on a "publicly subsidised model", and that the government has increased its budget for both small and large, as well as local and national museums since 1996. These budget plans have also resulted in the rapid establishment of new museums across the country, which is in line with government plans to secure one museum per 250.000 people by 2020 and to improve museum services, including virtual exhibitions.[72]

In scholarship on virtual exhibitions, academics mostly debate their forms, benefits and disadvantages. As a result, exhibition-elements are often labelled either 'good' or 'bad'. Although this focus in scholarship offers interesting insights to understand how virtual exhibitions can successfully operate, it means that they are currently still mostly observed as a novelty: the medium is studied rather than the exhibitions in their own right. It is because of this focus on communication strategies and design that a discussion on content and narrative is often missing. This thesis aims to incorporate analyses on both content and design within its three case studies. Considering their mutual impact, combining these two elements in the overall analysis enables a detailed discussion of the virtual exhibitions, their content and their possible impact. In order to do this successfully in the context of narrative promotion abroad, an understanding of virtual exhibitions as a medium is required.

Within the debate on virtual exhibitions as an emerging medium, scholars are mostly optimistic. They generally consider them an impactful development for museums' continued

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[70] Maribel Hidalgo Urbaneja, "Online Exhibitions and Online Publications: Interrogating the Typologies of Online Resources in Art Museums," *International Journal for Digital Art History* 4 (2019): 3.36

[71] Carreras, and Mancini, "A Story of Great Expectations," 89.

[72] Zhang and Courty, "The China Museum Boom," 30.

attempts to connect with and reach a broad audience. One positive characteristic that frequently comes forward within this debate, is that virtual visitors are able to move through the exhibitions at their own pace, without any added constraints from other visitors or opening hours.[73] It is because of this that scholars appear especially optimistic about the emergence of VR exhibitions. VR enables digital visitors to observe virtual exhibitions as though they are walking through them, resulting in a life-like museum experience from home, one where generic museum annoyances as described above are removed.[74] Mateos-Rusillo and Gifreu-Castells highlight that the easy and continuous accessibility of virtual exhibitions have yet another result. Temporary exhibitions' virtual editions, for instance, remain accessible to interested parties and researchers for years after the physical exhibition has ended, thus preserving the research that went into developing these exhibitions.[75] Furthermore, Katz and Halpern argue that virtual exhibitions can not only lead to a heightened interest among visitors in the content of the exhibitions, but also to a spike in visits to the physical exhibitions when the virtual visitors' interest in the collection is piqued. They argue that this might especially be true for younger generations due to their comfortability with the digital landscape.[76]

The underlying tone within this debate is however more critical. For example, Wolf, Reinhardt and Funk found that, though virtual exhibitions offer benefits in terms of removing space, time, location and money barriers for visitors, the virtual context in which the exhibitions are experienced results in the loss of "authenticity and sensation of space".[77] It is important to acknowledge that the time and money benefits for visitors require hefty time and monetary

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[73] Antonio M. Battro, "From Malraux's Imaginary Museum to the Virtual Museum," in *Museums in a Digital Age,* ed. Ross Parry (New York: Routledge, 2010): 138.

[74] See for example:
Anastasios Latos, Vasileios Komianos, and Konstantinos Oikonomou, "Interaction and Information Communication in Virtual Museums," *IOP Conference Series, Materials Science and Engineering* 364, no. 1 (2018): 1-8;

Yuting Zhou, Juanjuan Chen, and Minhong Wang, "A Meta-Analytic Review on Incorporating Virtual and Augmented Reality in Museum Learning," *Educational Research Review* 36, no. 1 (2022): 1-17;

Stella Sylaiou, Katerina Mania, Athanasis Karoulis, and Martin White, "Exploring the Relationship Between Presence and Enjoyment in a Virtual Museum," *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* 68, no. 5 (2010): 243-53.

[75] Mateos-Rusillo, and Gifreu-Castells, "Museums and Online Exhibitions," 42.

[76] James E. Katz, and Daniel Halpern, "Can Virtual Museums Motivate Students? Toward a Constructivist Learning Approach," *Journal of Science Education and Technology* 24, no. 6 (2015): 778.

[77] Katrin Wolf, Jens Reinhardt, and Markus Funk, "Virtual Exhibitions: What Do We Win and What Do We Lose?" (paper presented at the Electronic Visualisation and the Arts conference, July 2018): 85. https://www.scienceopen.com/hosted-document?doi=10.14236/ewic/EVA2018.15.

investments by museum curators and directors. Because most virtual exhibitions are offered for free, these initial costs might be challenging to overcome. This can make developing virtual exhibitions unattractive when they only lead to these four proposed benefits, which is something that the three scholars fail to acknowledge. The argument they make regarding the loss of a sense of authenticity, on the other hand, is a recurrent one within the debate. Schweibenz, for instance, argues in his work that the main difference between physical and virtual exhibitions is the contrariness between mediated- and unmediated-experiences. When visiting a virtual exhibition, visitors are not presented an object but an object *reproduction* which can result in "the withering of the object's aura".[78] This means that visitors might not experience the same emotional responses as they would when visiting a physical exhibition, and they are unlikely to feel as though they have actually seen the objects. Schweibenz nonetheless remains optimistic as he argues that the disappearance of the original object's aura makes way for the emergence of a 'virtual aura'. However, in order for this to succeed, new approaches, branching out from object-centric strategies that are often used in physical exhibitions, are required.[79]

Multiple scholars agree with Schweibenz and similarly argue that virtual exhibitions need to be significantly different from their physical counterparts in order for them to be impactful and negate their limiting characteristics. Bowen, for example, argues that virtual exhibitions are distinctly unique and different due to their usage of the internet, a medium that has both strengths and weaknesses that need to be exploited to ensure positive experiences.[80] Álvarez, Portús and Vives argue in favour of a similar approach, as they state that it is because virtual exhibitions make use of and are based on this distinctly different medium that "new forms of communication" are required.[81]

Kim delves into this communication issue, as he argues that the free and always accessible nature of virtual exhibitions results in there being no supervision or guidance on who visits the exhibitions or on how they are observed and interpreted. Consequently, even more so than in physical exhibitions, successful communication with visitors is not a guarantee.[82] According to

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[78] Werner Schweibenz, "Museums Exhibitions - The Real and the Virtual Ones: An Account of a Complex Relation," *Uncommon Culture* 3, no. 5 (2013): 40.

[79] Ibid., 42.

[80] Jonathen Bowen, "The Virtual Museum," *Museum International* 205, no. 1 (2000): 4.

[81] Francisco Álvarez, Maria Dolors Portús, and Josep Vives, "Del Zoo Victoriano al Ecosistema Electrónico: la Digitalización del Patrimonio en una Sociedad Digital," *Revista Patrimonio Cultural de España* 4 (2010): 144. [Translation found in Mateos-Rusillo, and Gifreu-Castells, "Museums and Online Exhibitions", 47].

[82] Kim, "Virtual Exhibitions and Communication Factors ," 253.

Kim, incorporating interactive elements, using a diverse presentation style and ensuring that there is a short response time can contribute to enhanced experiences of and communication with virtual visitors. When these elements are not successfully implemented, Kim fears that visitors will quickly lose their interest in the virtual exhibition.[83] Leow and Ch'ng also emphasise the importance of interactive virtual exhibitions to create dynamic and immersive online experiences. They offer the examples of being able to zoom in to observe details on artefacts as well as the incorporation of 'digital storytelling' to "narrate stories based on the memory of persons or [to retell] historical events from that perspective." This would connect people with the objects and information they observe and receive through the screen.[84] The suggestion of working with 'digital storytelling' techniques implies a certain recreation of or return to a historical setting, which can make objects or information more relatable to visitors. As Jelinčić, Šveb and Stewart describe, the recreation of certain historic scenes or a general confrontation with personal stories or experiences in exhibitions can lead to heightened emotional responses from visitors due to the invitation to identify oneself with the history and the people who lived it. This in turn increases the likelihood that visitors remember the exhibitions and their informative content for longer periods of time.[85] This strategy could therefore possibly lead to the creation of something resembling Schweibenz's 'virtual aura'.

Overall, scholars seem to agree that virtual exhibitions can be a welcome addition to, rather than a replacement of, physical exhibitions when they manage to fulfil certain design and communication needs that stem from the disadvantages that come with using a digital platform. Most scholars therefore appear optimistic, and they generally agree that the internet offers curators an opportunity to engage and communicate with audiences, regardless of distance.

As mentioned before, many Chinese museums are investing in the development of virtual exhibitions. It was the global pandemic, which resulted in hefty quarantine measures and travel restrictions, that moved Chinese museums, with support from the government, to rapidly develop digital versions of their exhibitions alongside other online services to continue to reach, educate and entertain audiences.[86] This implies a certain desire from both museums and the

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[83] Ibid., 254.

[84] Fui-Theng Leow, and Eugene Ch'ng, "Analysing Narrative Engagement with Immersve Environments: Designing Audience-Centric Experiences for Cultural Heritage Learning," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 36, no. 4 (2021): 344-45.

[85] Daniela Angelina Jelinčić, Marta Šveb, and Alan E. Stewart, "Designing Sensory Museums Experiences for Visitors' Emotional Responses," *Museums Management and Curatorship* (2021): 2. https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2021.1954985.

[86] Lin, "Museums Across China."

Chinese government to match developments of museums in the West, where virtual exhibitions have slowly emerged since the early 2000s. It is also indicative of an attempt by the Chinese government to reach both domestic and international audiences, who might not be able to visit the museums in person. Perhaps due to their relative 'newness', Chinese virtual exhibitions remain undiscussed in existing scholarship. This is surprising nonetheless, considering the wide range of literature on Chinese museums and on virtual exhibitions. This thesis will therefore focus on these virtual exhibitions to fill this gap in the literature. As mentioned above, it will do so by not only discussing the exhibitions' design and communication strategies in detail, but also by delving into their content. This thesis proposes that the academic understanding of Chinese museums as tools for the CCP to promote certain narratives on the country's history, is applicable to virtual museums as well. However, as has been made clear, this thesis will expand this argument by considering the narratives presented to and possible effects on foreign audiences specifically.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Case selection

This thesis analyses three different virtual exhibitions from Chinese museums that present the history of the rise to power of the CCP. The selected exhibitions are 'The Road to Rejuvenation' from the National Museum of China (中国国家博物馆), from here on referred to as the National Museum, 'The CCP-led Revolution' from the Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution (中国人民革命军事博物馆), and 'The Three Victories' from the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders (侵华日军南京大屠杀遇难同胞纪念馆), from here on referred to as the Nanjing Memorial Hall. These exhibitions were selected based on homogenous case sampling so that a discussion on the presentation of a specific historic period, in a specific setting, to a specific audience could follow. The selection was thus based on whether or not the museums and their virtual exhibitions met a set of predetermined requirements. These requirements were as follows:

1. The museum that offers the selected virtual exhibition must be closely tied to state-organs.

   Close connections between the museum and the Party can indicate the influence of the CCP on the development and content of exhibitions. Consequently, the virtual exhibitions can be understood as possible soft power tools that aim to tell 'China's story'. The three museums selected for this research have close ties to the Chinese government, which is explicitly discussed on their websites. On the National Museum's English and Chinese websites, there are detailed sections describing the long history of the museum's collaboration with and its original commissioning by the CCP. President Xi Jinping's influence in developing 'The Road to Rejuvenation' exhibition is explicitly mentioned as well. The websites also mention that the current museum director previously worked for numerous government departments and was once a member of the Standing Committee.[87] On the Chinese website of the Military Museum, a detailed account of the museum's "brilliant history", referring to the commissioning and designing of exhibitions by and the continued collaboration with CCP officials ever

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[87] "About the NMC", National Museum of China, accessed January 27, 2023,
http://en.chnmuseum.cn/about_the_nmc_593/about_the_nmc_594/201911/t20191122_173221.html;

"Wang Chunfa", National Museum of China, accessed January 27, 2023,
http://en.chnmuseum.cn/about_the_nmc_593/leadership/201911/t20191122_173234.html.

since the museum's construction in the 1950s, can be found.[88] This information cannot be found on the English website. The Nanjing Memorial Hall has a similar clear difference between its English and Chinese versions of its webpage on the museum's history. Though both versions offer a timeline listing important visits and the establishment of the museum and its exhibitions, the close relations with the Party and key CCP figures as well as their many visits only come forward on the Chinese version.[89]

2. The exhibitions must have been developed after Xi Jinping came to power in 2013.
   This requirement was set to ensure that the case studies reflected Xi's 'China's story' model discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis. In other words, the narratives communicated through the exhibitions adhere to Xi's ideas on communicating about China and the CCP. The exhibition by the National Museum was opened in 2013 by Xi himself. The 'CCP-led Revolutions' exhibition in the Military Museum was opened in June 2020, and the 'Three Victories' exhibition in the Nanjing Memorial Hall was opened in December 2015. Because the virtual exhibitions are digital copies of their physical counterparts, they meet this requirement.

3. The museum that offers the selected virtual exhibition must be classified as a 'first-grade museum' by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage.
   According to Nan's description, first-grade museums have a clear "social and educational mission" and possess "numerous objects which have very high historical, cultural, scientific, and artistic value". These museums generally enjoy more support from the government than lower grade museums do.[90] This requirement was set to ensure that the museum not only receives active support from the government, which again indicates close relations, but also that the museum is relatively well-known both

[88] "Huīhuáng lìchéng 辉煌历程" [Brilliant History], Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution, accessed January 27, 2023, http://www.jb.mil.cn/jbgk/hhlc_2190/.

[89] "Guǎn shǐ shìjì 馆史事迹" [Museum History], Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders, accessed January 27, 2023, https://www.19371213.com.cn/about/history/.

[90] Nan Feng, "Overview of Preventive Conservation and the Museum Environment in China," *Studies in Conservation* 61, no. 1 (2016): 20.

domestically and abroad due to its status. Consequently, the museum's virtual exhibitions have the potential to reach a broader audience.

4. The museum must offer a virtual exhibition that is free of charge, accessible to English speakers, and that presents the history of the CCP's rise to power.[91]
The National Museum's 'Road to Rejuvenation' details China's history from the late 1800s until present day, though most of the exhibition zooms in on the Civil War period. The Military Museum's 'CCP-led revolutions' lays down the history of the Civil War and its many battles, as well as the fight against the Japanese occupiers. The exhibition from the Nanjing Memorial Hall offers a different perspective on the same history presented in the other two exhibitions because it focuses on a specific period during the CCP's rise to power, namely China's fight against the Japanese. It also compares and links this fight to Second World War history around the world and provides a discussion on international actors at play in China at the time. By including this exhibition in the analysis, diversity within exhibitions on Chinese modern history will be considered, which consequently enables a more inclusive discussion. All three exhibitions are freely accessible through the English websites of their respective museums, and offer content in English.

Though many different Chinese virtual exhibitions are available, the selected exhibitions are the only ones to meet all set requirements. For example, though the Yan'an Revolutionary Memorial Museum (延安革命纪念) offers a free, high-quality virtual exhibition on the rise to power of the CCP with information in English, the museum's website, through which interested parties must find and access this virtual exhibition, is only available in Chinese. This exhibition is therefore inaccessible to English speakers and consequently does not meet the requirements set for this research.

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[91] The selected virtual exhibitions met these requirements throughout the duration of this research project.

3.2 Critical discourse analysis

When analysing a traditional exhibition's narrative and content, a wide variety of elements must be considered. Museums tell their stories not just through written text, but also through artefacts and other items and pictures that support or enhance the narratives.[92] These different mediums are consequently connected in a discursive formation and must thus all be considered to understand the complete story presented within an exhibition. The virtual case studies selected in this research operate in a similar manner. All three are designed to simulate the experience of walking through a physical exhibition.[93] The virtual exhibitions' storytelling therefore also occurs through the presentation of images, texts, and objects in a museum setting. In order to discuss the narratives presented through these different mediums, this research applied a critical discourse analysis.

Discourse refers to the space where specific meanings and understandings of reality are constructed and expressed through communicative processes such as written texts, speech or imagery. It thus concerns itself with "the politics of representation", as established understandings of the world impact how specific events are interpreted and communicated, and vice versa.[94] This also means that, according to discourse scholars, objective truths do not exist; everything must be interpreted and represented before it becomes 'socially real'.[95] Discourse analysis, then, can be understood as a method that analyses "language in use", as it considers what effects specific usages of (visual) language have on the construction of reality.[96] Critical discourse analyses go one step further by considering the power dynamics at play in this process. Those who hold powerful positions in, for example, politics, education, communities and the media have the ability to influence discourse by choosing to represent and promote specific understandings of reality. This can eventually even lead to the creation of so-called 'regimes of truth' where there is no longer any room for divergent discourses.[97] It is because of this consideration of power dynamics that discourse as a theoretical framework and critical

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[92] Duncan F Cameron, "A Viewpoint: The Museum as a Communications System and Implications for Museum Education," *Curator* XI (1968): 34.

[93] The three virtual exhibitions appear to be direct copies of their physical counterparts.

[94] Anna Holzscheiter, "Between Communicative Interaction and Structures of Signification: Discourse Theory and Analysis in International Relations," *International Studies Perspectives* 15, no. 2 (2014):144.

[95] Ibid., 144.

[96] Gillian Brown, and George Yule, *Discourse Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 1.

[97] Michel Foucault. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980): 131.

discourse analysis as a method were selected for this thesis. They align with this project's proposal of understanding the analysed virtual exhibitions as possible soft power tools for and by the Chinese government to construct and promote narratives on the CCP. Furthermore, critical discourse analysis' consideration of social contexts to understand how and why specific discourses are shaped, enables a fruitful discussion on the museums, their relations to the CCP, and the domestic representation of CCP history in order to contextualise and support any observations made.[98]

All content of the three virtual exhibitions that is accessible to those who do not speak Chinese was analysed in order to discuss the narrative on the CCP's rise to power as presented to foreign visitors. For the analysis of written texts, specific word choices and their implications as well as the recurrence of certain themes were considered. The wider narrative, for example the (repeated) inclusion of certain historical events or figures and the exclusion of others, was also studied by critically assessing the information provision through not only texts, but also objects and images. Information provided in Chinese only was disregarded in the analysis.[99] Though analysing the possible differences between the Chinese and English narratives in the exhibitions would make a fascinating project, it goes beyond the scope of this research considering its focus on the narratives presented to foreigners specifically. Furthermore, as previously discussed, the narratives on Chinese modern history as presented to Chinese citizens have already been widely studied.[100]

The museum context makes it so that mediums other than written texts need to be considered as well. Though analysing written text is of massive importance because it provides insight into how the museum hopes visitors interpret the exhibition, texts must be observed alongside and in relation to surrounding images and objects. This research therefore also considered recurrent visual imagery and their connections to written discourse to discover and discuss clusters of meaning and possible relations between these clusters.

The three exhibitions analysed in this research rely heavily on photographs to communicate with visitors who do not speak Chinese. This is due to the occasional lack of

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[98] Lichao Song, "The Role of Context in Discourse Analysis," *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 1, no. 6 (2010): 878.

[99] See footnote 13.

[100] See for example:
Denton, *Exhibiting the Past;*

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "In Search of a Master Narrative for 20th-Century Chinese History," *The China Quarterly* 188, no. 1 (2006): 1070-91.

informative panels in English as well as the limited amount of objects on display.[101] It was thus of massive importance for this research to carefully consider and analyse the many photographs and the narratives they communicate. Furthermore, photographs are powerful tools to construct regimes of truth, as people tend to believe they capture reality and are thus, at least somewhat, objective.[102] This, in addition to their ability to transcend language barriers, means that a photograph's potential to communicate a certain narrative or convince visitors of said narrative should not be underestimated. The three analysed exhibitions include too many photographs for this research to discuss them all in detail. However, in order to still gain insight into the exhibitions' storytelling through this medium, the photographs were counted and categorised based on content so that a discussion on the narratives they communicate could still be included.[103] These categories were established inductively. It is important to note that not all photographs were entirely visible due to the virtual exhibitions' affordances or low resolutions.[104] Because these photographs are inaccessible to any virtual visitor, they were not considered in this research.

Critical discourse analyses require a certain amount of interpretation by a researcher on any given material; again, as discourse analsists would argue, there is no such thing as objective truths. However, this method's consideration of contexts whilst analysing the visual and textual, still enables insightful discussions on how materials are used to communicate certain narratives. This thesis therefore supports its findings by providing detailed discussions of examples as well as information on the exhibitions, the museums, and the CCP itself.

3.3 Measuring soft power

In addition to gaining an understanding of the narratives presented to foreigners within Chinese virtual exhibitions, this research also considers their possible soft power effects. Measuring soft power is, however, notoriously difficult. Yun describes the two most frequently used strategies in academics to observe soft power effects. The first strategy measures popular opinions and ideas regarding a country, for instance by conducting interviews or by analysing the depiction

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[101] The analysed virtual exhibitions only include English translations.

[102] John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009): xixi-xixii.

[103] See the appendix for the categorisation.

[104] This is of course an interesting finding in itself, and will be discussed in more detail chapter 5.

of a country in the news, social media or pop culture. The second focuses on observing whether or not there is a significant increase in engagement with a certain country, for instance in the form of tourism flows or exchange students.[105] Both of these strategies are inapplicable to this research. Because this project is conducted entirely online, interviewing the virtual exhibitions' foreign visitors to discuss their perceptions on the CCP is not possible. Analysing increased interactions between China and other countries is also not a viable option as it goes far beyond the scope of this project. Moreover, if a significant change in opinion or engagement was to be found, it would be impossible to ensure that this is a result of these virtual exhibitions.

In order to still be able to discuss soft power in relation to these virtual exhibitions, this thesis refrains from attempting to conclude if the exhibitions have any effects, and instead aims to discuss if they have the potential to. As discussed in the previous chapter, a museum's primary objective is to successfully communicate with its visitors and to inform them about the topic on display.[106] This means that when communication is hindered or fails, the museum does not fulfil this objective and will thus either not be informative or convey information that it does not intend to convey. Possibly convincing visitors or altering their perceptions of a certain topic would then be impossible, and it would consequently be unlikely for the exhibitions to have any soft power effects. This thesis therefore considers the obstacles that the virtual exhibitions face, as well as the navigation of said obstacles, when communicating to foreign visitors to discuss whether or not the exhibitions have the potential to have any soft power effects. It does so by considering the suggestions and requirements for successful communication through virtual exhibitions as laid out by scholars such as Kim and Schweibenz.[107] The found design and communication strategies of the selected cases shall be compared to these ideas in the discussion chapter of this thesis.

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[105] Yun Seong-Hun, "An Overdue Critical Look at Soft Power Measurement: the Construct Validity of the Soft Power 30 in Focus," *Journal of International and Area Studies* 25, no. 2 (2018): 2

[106] Kim, "Virtual Exhibitions and Communication Factors," 243.

[107] Ibid., 243-60;

Schweibenz, "Museums Exhibitions – The Real and the Virtual Ones," 38-52.

Chapter 4: The virtual exhibitions' narratives

This chapter will discuss the story on the CCP's rise to power as communicated to foreigners in the three analysed virtual exhibitions.[108] Because the exhibitions rely heavily on photographs in their communication with foreign visitors, a categorisation of the displayed photographs was made to gain insight into what general story the exhibitions hope to convey and what the possible differences between the three exhibitions are. This categorisation, which can be found in the appendix of this thesis, shows that the exhibitions have different focus points in telling the story of China's modern history. These differences need to be addressed first in order to better understand each exhibition's usage of objects, words and references to specific people and events.

The photograph categorisation shows that the 'Road to Rejuvenation' virtual exhibition from the National Museum focuses on presenting 'the political'. 118 out of a total 271 photographs depict portraits of influential figures from the CCP and its army as well as many meetings between these figures. The Party is thus omnipresent throughout the exhibition. This observed focus aligns with the exhibition's close ties to the Party. It was president Xi Jinping who opened the physical exhibition in 2013, and it was there where he presented his guiding presidential ideology of the 'Chinese dream.' This ideology centres on rejuvenating the country, hence the title of the exhibition, through large-scale development in order to become a respected global superpower.[109] Because the virtual exhibition appears to be a direct copy of its physical counterpart, which has not been altered since its opening, both the physical and virtual versions of the exhibition are inherently connected to the current president, the Party and its ideology. The presence of the Party within this politically charged exhibition can thus be attributed to these close relations.

The photographs in the 'CCP-led Revolutions' virtual exhibition from the Military Museum indicate that, unsurprisingly, the exhibition focuses on telling the story of the Red Army soldiers. 43% of all photographs included in the exhibition depict soldiers, generals,

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[108] In the exhibitions, the Communist Party is referred to as the "CPC", an abbreviation that stands for the 'Communist Party of China'. This is the abbreviation used by the Chinese themselves. The abbreviation used throughout this thesis, 'CCP', is most commonly used in the West and stands for the 'Chinese Communist Party'.

[109] Xi Jinping, "Achieving Rejuvenation is the Dream of the Chinese People," transcript of speech delivered at 'The Road to Rejuvenation' exhibition in the National Museum of China, November 29, 2012, http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/c23934/202006/32191c5bbdb04cbab6df01e5077d1c60.shtml.

warzones or the production of uniforms and weapons. The exhibition therefore predominantly features a war theme.

The Nanjing Memorial Hall's 'The Three Victories' dedicates a significant amount of its photography display to presenting the hardships endured by the Chinese people in the years leading up to and during the Japanese occupation. In fact, this exhibition includes 10% more gruesome imagery than the other two exhibitions do combined. It also dedicates a large section of its exhibition to communicating a theme of justice, as seventy photographs picture the prosecution of war criminals, whereas the exhibitions from the National Museum and the Military Museum include zero and four respectively. The exhibition's heightened attention to gruesome history and its aftermath aligns with the fact that the Nanjing Memorial Hall is not just a museum, but also a memorial centre dedicated to the commemoration of traumatic history, specifically of the Nanjing Massacre.

Despite these differences, all three exhibitions were found to present a uniform story of the CCP's rise to power and the subsequent founding of the PRC. This story consists of, and can therefore be dissected into, four main narratives or components: the suffering of the Chinese people before their 'liberation' by the CCP at the end of the Civil War, the heroism of the Red Army, the good of the CCP, and the popular support for the Communist Party that resulted in the creation of a nation. This chapter will discuss each of these narratives in detail.

4.1 The suffering people

A key element in the story presented in all three exhibitions, is the description and visual presentation of the hardships endured by the Chinese people leading up to and during the Civil War years. For example, the vast majority of the exhibitions' photographs on which civilians are depicted present this suffering in a rather confronting manner.[110] All three exhibitions, but especially 'The Three Victories', include images of wounded and deceased civilians. These images are accompanied by informative panels on which the blame for these shocking sights is given to either foreign imperialists or the Kuomintang (KMT), the nationalist party who governed China between 1927 and 1949.

The virtual exhibition from the National Museum begins by describing how the Chinese people were "looking for a way to save the nation" from the humiliation caused by foreign imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries. The exhibition turns to the Opium Wars (1839-1842

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[110] See "gruesome imagery" in the appendix.

and 1856-1860) and their effects on Chinese society to illustrate what this humiliation entailed. A panel describes that "imperial powers descended on China like a swarm of bees, looting our treasures and killing our people." The words "descended [..] like a swarm of bees" help sketch an image of money- and power-hungry imperial powers who frantically attacked China unprovoked. This panel also sets the tone for the remainder of the exhibition because of its reference to the "two great historic missions of the Chinese nation", namely "achieving national independence and liberation of the people." The exhibition later describes that the CCP was the saviour China needed to achieve these objectives.

The Military Museum's exhibition does not reference the Opium Wars or other forms of Western imperialism in China. Instead, it immediately turns to the hardships endured by the people during the Civil War period because of the KMT. Throughout the exhibition, the guiding informative panels describe the KMT as a party of "suppression" that "adhered to its reactionary policy of autocratic rule and civil war". The KMT is thus not only presented as a non-democratic party that restricted its citizens, but also as the instigator of the Civil War. This shifts the blame for the war, and any casualties that fell or destruction that occurred as a result, to the KMT. The CCP is thus relieved from any responsibility for the people's suffering as a direct consequence of the war.

Though the suffering of people is a narrative that frequently comes forward throughout the virtual exhibitions in a variety of contexts, it is especially prominent in the sections on the Japanese occupation. The National Museum's exhibition includes two walls filled with photographs, an informative panel and five objects related to and on the Japanese occupation. The Military Museum dedicates approximately a third of its exhibition to this history. The exhibition from the Nanjing Memorial Hall offers the most detail on this period, as it is entirely focused on representing and commemorating the Japanese occupation, the fight against it, and its aftermath.

The first panel in the virtual exhibition from the Memorial Hall informs visitors on how they are expected to interpret the story of China's years under Japanese rule. It does so by assigning moral judgements to this history. It reads: "Countries including Germany, Japan and Italy walked on a road toward fascism and aggression, becoming two sources of the world war in Europe and Asia […] The atrocious invasions launched by fascists caused the loss of numerous lives and the enormous destruction of human civilisation, resulting in an unprecedented calamity in history and an enormous catastrophe of mankind." This panel reads as an interpreted, rather than purely factual, description of history. For example, a choice was made to use the adjective 'atrocious' to describe the invasions. In doing so, the panel

communicates to visitors that these invasions were inherently barbaric. It consequently establishes that divergent opinions on or interpretations of the occupation are unwelcome. This quote also places the Japanese occupation of Chinese territories in a global context, as references to Second World War (WWII) experiences in Europe and Asia are included. Furthermore, the Japanese turn to fascism is described as part of wider international developments because of the reference to other countries following a similar path.

The Military Museum's exhibition applies a comparable international framework in its section on the Japanese occupation. In addition to framing the fight against the Japanese on Chinese soil as part of "the world's anti-fascist war," the exhibition 'zooms out' from the Chinese war experience by featuring multiple well-known images of the war from other countries, including the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Yalta conference and the waving of the Soviet flag on the Reichstag in Berlin. Because these photographs are hung next to images of the fight against and victory over the Japanese in China specifically, the Chinese war experience is presented as an important aspect of this global history. These implied similarities and connections between the war experiences in China and other parts of Asia and the West can have powerful effects on foreign visitors who might be more familiar with other local WWII history. Familiarity enables visitors to better understand and relate to narratives on display. It also strengthens visitors' ability to be mindful during their visit, resulting in improved mental and emotional involvement.[111] The implied similarity can therefore boost foreign virtual visitors' ability to understand the presented story.

All three virtual exhibitions mostly communicate the story of the Japanese occupation through displays of gruesome images that support claims made in written texts, where the aggression of the Japanese is described. For instance, an informative panel in the 'The Three Victories' exhibition states that "Japanese militarists committed countless atrocities in their aggressions, bringing unprecedented calamities to the Chinese people and leaving one of the darkest chapters of human history." Surrounding panels further paint the Japanese as aggressors by describing that "fascist forces rampaged and became the evilest and most brutal and reckless enemies of the human race" by "[carrying] out atrocious massacres and oppressions against innocent civilians in Asia […] committing unforgivable war crimes." Visitors are confronted with this described aggression by the accompanying collage of chilling photographs depicting

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[111] Tianyu Ying, Xiaoyuan Tan, Shun Ye, Xiyan Ka, and Yaqing Zhou, "Examining Tourist Mindfulness in Museums: the Roles of Familiarity and Motivation," *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research* 25, no. 9 (2020): 991.

the "Japanese invasion of North-Eastern China and other places and its crimes" (figure 1).[112] The collage includes a variety of photographs depicting the ways in which Chinese civilians and troops were threatened or harmed by the Japanese. On one of these photographs, blindfolded Chinese men are kneeling down as a Japanese soldier with a samurai sword stands next to them. The Chinese men are surrounded by beheaded bodies and severed heads of executed people. The Japanese soldiers who surround the scene, and who are thus watching the public executions unfold, are smiling. This image therefore does not only communicate a theme of suffering, but it also shows sadistic tendencies of the Japanese. Other images depict dead bodies, a pile of decapitated heads and skeletal remains in a mass grave.

Figure 1: Images of 'Japanese Aggression'. Nanjing Memorial Hall, 'The Three Victories' virtual exhibition.

A variety of Chinese characters and numbers, ranging from 1200 to 30.000, are written on the wall on which these photographs are hung. Though visitors who do not speak Chinese cannot be fully certain of what these numbers represent, them being presented alongside these photographs and written texts likely enables these visitors to deduce that they indicate the amount of victims in different locations or of different occasions. The numbers provide a framework for the misery and death in the photographs. Instead of virtual visitors understanding this depicted suffering as specific instances where injustice occurred, the numbers push for an understanding of the scale of these gruesome acts and of how many people were affected by them.

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[112] All figures are screenshots of the virtual exhibitions and were made by the author.

Both the National Museum and Military Museum's virtual exhibitions include similar photograph collages. The former dedicates a significant portion of its section on the Japanese occupation to images of starving prisoners, mass graves, and dead and disfigured bodies who have been carelessly piled on top of each other (figure 2). Because these images are in black and white, the details of the victims' bodies are blurred. It is therefore difficult to see where one body ends and another begins. As a result, the victims are stripped of their individuality and almost become one. This enhances these images' ability to depict the scale of this suffering as well as the general disrespect for human life. The images of starving prisoners and skeletal remains in mass graves are featured in all three virtual exhibitions. This recurrent usage might be a result of the idea that images blatantly showcasing the scale of the suffering and the wrongful treatment of prisoners of war, which is a breach of international law, express the Japanese brutality during the occupation in an undeniable and convincing manner. What sets the collage from the Military Museum apart from the ones in the other exhibitions, is its inclusion of images depicting the suffering of children. For example, one photo pictures a crying and wounded baby left behind in a destroyed city landscape on what appears to be a railway track. Another shows corpses of undressed children piled on top of each other.

Figure 2: Collage of photos of Japanese war crimes. National Museum of China, 'Road to Rejuvenation' virtual exhibition.

Though the photographs included in these collages are generally accompanied by small informative labels, it is often impossible for the foreign virtual visitor to read these because of the low resolution of the exhibition, the awkward angle from which the visitor is made to read the labels, or because they are only available in Chinese. In fact, the National Museum does not

include any written information in English on what the "Japanese aggression" they refer to actually entailed. The details in regard to where and when the photographs were taken, how many casualties have fallen, who the victims and offenders were, or any information on the circumstances under which these acts were committed are consequently often lost to foreign visitors. The photographs are thus left to speak for themselves. And yet, the exhibitions succeed in communicating a clear narrative of suffering.

As discussed before, images are powerful tools for storytelling because they are believed to capture 'the real', which consequently makes them convincing tools that can operate as 'proof' to support a specific narrative.[113] This, in addition to the fact that photographs can transcend language and often cultural barriers, means that the discussed collages enable any visitor to bear witness to the suffering of the Chinese. Furthermore, photographs typically evoke more intense emotional responses and tend to have a larger impact on opinions than written texts do, especially when the observer is less familiar with the content.[114] Provoking emotions is a powerful communication strategy, as it enhances visitor engagement with the exhibition by inviting them to think more about its content. Visitors who experience these emotional responses are generally found to not only enjoy their museum visit more, but also to better grasp and be convinced of the story that the exhibitions tell.[115] The emotions or sympathy that visitors might feel after observing the gruesome photograph collages therefore help create lasting impressions and better understandings of the history on display. It is therefore unsurprising that the sections on the Japanese occupation and China's years under KMT rule within the virtual exhibitions mostly communicate with foreign visitors through photographs rather than objects, paintings, sculptures or (detailed) pieces of written information. Photographs of the gruesome acts committed by the Japanese and the KMT do not only successfully manage to communicate and underline the narrative of suffering in a convincing manner without a need for translation, they also enable any visitor to understand and sympathise with the remainder of the exhibitions, where the consequent attempts by the CCP and its soldiers to defeat the Japanese and the KMT are discussed.

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[113] Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame,* xixi-xixii.

[114] Thomas E. Powell, Hajo G. Boomgaarden, Knut De Swert, and Claes H. de Vreese, "A Clearer Picture: The Contribution of Visuals and Text to Framing Effects," *Journal of Communication* 65, no. 6 (2015): 1010

[115] See for example:
Katie Barclay, "Family, Memory and Emotion in the Museum," *Emotion, Space and Society* 35 (2020): 1-8;

Cecilia Rodéhn, "Emotions in the Museum of Medicine: An Investigation of how Museum Educators Employ Emotions and What These Emotions Do," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26, no. 2 (2020): 202.

4.2 The heroic Red Army soldiers

All three exhibitions dedicate a significant amount of space to the fight against the KMT and the Japanese by the CCP and its soldiers. This is reflected in the fact that the exhibitions' most featured theme in their photograph displays is war, as shown in the photograph categorisation.[116] These photographs depict generals and soldiers, both in and outside of combat, battle scenes, weapons, military vehicles and the production of weaponry and armour. Photographs of soldiers from the Red Army, which was established by and aligned to the CCP, are especially prominent. [117] Furthermore, the vast majority of objects included in the exhibitions are weapons. Throughout the exhibitions, the soldiers are continuously described as determined heroes willing to sacrifice whatever it took to 'liberate' China, which aligns with what Varutti argues in her work.[118] Especially the Military Museum, with its focus on the military efforts during the Civil War years, features this narrative clearly.

Upon entering the 'CCP-led Revolutions' virtual exhibition, visitors are greeted by a massive statue (figure 3). It depicts a group of men holding their weapons high whilst charging towards the visitor. All men have stern facial expressions, appear to scream some sort of battle cry, and look in the same direction. This depiction of the soldiers and the size of the statue makes it a quite intimidating piece, as the soldiers appear determined, unstoppable and unrelenting. The big Communist flag that rises above the men indicates that these soldiers fight in the name of the CCP and are united under the Party.

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[116] See the appendix.

[117] See the appendix.

[118] Varutti, *Museums in China*, 3-4.

Figure 3: Statue depicting Red Army soldiers. Military Museum, 'The CPC-led Revolutions' virtual exhibition.

Similar depictions of the Red Army in the midst or at the beginning of a fight are found throughout the exhibitions on paintings. In the exhibition of the National Museum, for example, a massive mural behind a boat depicts a battle on sea (figure 4). The mural not only places the boat in a specific historical context, it also communicates a narrative of bravery. Bombs dropped by overhead airplanes create big splashes in the rough waters surrounding the many boats, and the dark smoke indicates that one of the boats was hit and is now burning. These elements illustrate the dangers that the Red Army troops faced in battle. Despite these circumstances, the soldiers on the boats continue to shoot their guns, whilst others defyingly raise their fists in the air. On every boat, one soldier can be seen waving a big red flag representing the Communist Party. This depicted pride in the cause and the CCP conveys the soldiers' determinism to win the war in the name of the Party, despite the precarious circumstances.

Figure 4: Boat and mural of a battle at sea. National Museum, 'Road to Rejuvenation' virtual exhibition.

The fact that the exhibitions include references to these battle scenes through paintings, rather than through the most frequently used medium of photography, is telling. Paintings can represent history in colour, which can make history seem more 'alive' than black and white imagery does. Furthermore, as the exhibitions predominantly feature black and white photographs, the paintings become large pops of colour that draw the eye in. Because paintings are mostly used in the exhibitions to depict battle scenes, it is clear that a deliberate choice was made to represent this specific history through this specific medium. The decision to present these scenes through paintings was not one made out of necessity, as many photographs were taken during the Civil War's battles. Perhaps the choice was made in order to draw more attention to and thus highlight the bravery of the soldiers in the exhibitions. It is also important to consider the fact that certain elements, such as the fearless looks on the soldiers' faces or the continuous waving of the Communist flag, can be emphasised in or added to paintings to further push for a narrative of bravery and determinism.

To further enhance this narrative of the Red Army's great bravery and heroism, the Military Museum's exhibition repeatedly describes the soldiers as powerful and strong. For example, a panel states that the Red Army "smashed the Japanese strategic attempt of fighting [a] battle of quick decision." The word "smashed" implies that the Japanese troops were significantly weaker than the Red Army soldiers. In a later section of the exhibition, it is described how the Red Army, which after defeating the Japanese has been known as the PLA,

was able to "[defeat] more than 800 million KMT troops, which was as easy as crushing dry weeds and smashing rotten wood."[119] In this quote, it is implied that either the PLA soldiers possessed such strength and determinism that they could defeat the KMT easily, or that the KMT was so weak that defeating them took little to no effort, as "crushing dry weeds" would. In a following panel, the idea of the strong and resolute PLA troops is repeated once more as it describes that "the whole army developed into a force including more than four million servicemen, becoming a victorious and powerful force."

Similar word choices are made in the Nanjing Memorial Hall's exhibition, where the ultimate victory over the Japanese is described as "a great triumph" that "completely shattered fascists and militarists' ambition to conquer the world through war, thoroughly put an end to the history of great powers partitioning the world through colonization, and shattered the colonial system that had existed in the world for centuries." In this quote, the Chinese victory over the Japanese is described as a world altering event, as it is stated to have brought an end to global efforts by fascists and militarists as well as the global colonial system. Similar to the exhibition's description of the international relevance of the Chinese war against the Japanese, its victory is also framed in a global context. Furthermore, the recurrent use of the word 'shattered' implies that the Red Army's victory was swift and led to the definitive termination of Japanese imperialism and the destruction of the Japanese empire.

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[119] The number in this quote is the result of a translation mistake. In the Chinese text, which is provided above the English translation, it is stated that the CCP defeated "over 80 thousand people" (8 多万的人), rather than 800 million people.

The narrative of heroism is strengthened by the inclusion of elements of suffering that come forward in the exhibitions' depictions of the lives of the soldiers during the Civil War period. These elements illustrate how, despite the endured challenging environments and battles, the soldiers continued to fight. For instance, both the National Museum and Military Museum feature the same bronze statue titled 'Difficult Times', which depicts what appears to be a father playing the flute to his sleeping son. Both figures wear the Red Army cap and are armed with a gun (see figure 3). In the National Museum, this statue is placed in the centre of a room dedicated to the history of the Long March (1934-1935) and the destruction of the Civil War and the Japanese occupation. In the Military Museum, the statue is surrounded by group photos and portraits of soldiers. The inclusion of this statue in these rooms and its portrayal of a young armed boy communicates to visitors that even children were fighting in the war scenes that surround them. This statue is therefore quite shocking, though it might simultaneously provide some comfort to visitors. It manages to humanise the troops because of the father figure's attempt to soothe the boy. Both figures being barefoot might tell visitors how soldiers, regardless of age, were unequipped at times and did not enjoy any luxuries during the fights. Though the suffering of soldiers comes up multiple times, this potential hint at the unpreparedness of or resource shortage for the army is unique to this specific statue, as it does not come forward again within any of the exhibitions. Whenever the suffering of soldiers is discussed, it is consistently attributed to the actions of the KMT, the Japanese, or to factors

Figure 5: Statue of two soldiers. National Museum of China, 'Road to Rejuvenation' virtual exhibition.

outside of human control such as weather. This statue's possible implied 'failure' of the Red Army to provide to its soldiers therefore does not align with the exhibitions' story.

The Military Museum expresses the difficulties that the Red Army soldiers had to overcome more explicitly in its written texts. A panel on the Long March states that "the Red Army and guerrillas who stayed in the South adhered to the guerrilla warfare with extreme hardship and difficulty for three years." In other panels, it is described how "successive years of natural disasters […] added to the extreme difficulties faced by the war of resistance" and that despite "an intense and fierce war environment" the soldiers were still victorious. This quote's terminology, for example "extreme difficulties", "extreme hardships" and "intense […] environment", emphasises not only the suffering of the soldiers, but also their bravery to continue the fight in the face of adversity. However, this terminology is also rather vague in terms of what this "hardship" exactly entailed.

Both the Military Museum and Nanjing Memorial Hall exemplify these hardships and the continued bravery of the soldiers through lifelike dioramas of historic scenes. They offer visitors a detailed look into what the fights against the KMT and the Japanese were like. The scene from the Memorial Hall in figure 6 portrays a group of soldiers surrounded by barbed wire laying on their stomachs as they aim their guns towards the enemy. The structure of a broken bridge looms dangerously above them. In the background, multiple pillars of smoke can be seen, indicating a fierce battle. The foreground features a running soldier with a stern facial expression, who is carrying both a gun and ammunition. The charging soldier, the distant indicators of combat as well as the red light casted on this scene create the idea of this being a dangerous and tense life or death setting. This diorama therefore manages to convey feelings of anxiety and urgency, whilst the soldier's facial expression and the focus on the enemy in the distance underline the descriptions of the Red Army troops as brave heroes willing to defy threatening scenarios.

Figure 6: Recreation of a battle scene. Nanjing Memorial Hall, "The Three Victories" virtual exhibition.

The Military Museum's exhibition includes multiple dioramas, but the one depicting the suffering of the Red Army during the Long March is the biggest and most detailed (figure 7). The floor features a map showing exactly where the soldiers marched, and the dioramas on the left and right illustrate what landscapes they encountered on their journey. The snow, the frost on the soldiers' clothing, the tall mountain tops and the dark stormy clouds in the scene on the left enable visitors to imagine the temperatures soldiers had to endure during their march. A lifelike doll dressed as a Red Army soldier is seen entirely covered in frost as he lies lifeless between two comrades attempting to hold him upright. The two soldiers supporting the body appear unwilling to let the frozen man go. This emotional and desperate response to loss conveys the soldiers' humanity and, once again, suffering. The troops in the background signify the Red Army's determination, as the troops continue to march, whilst waving the Communist flag, despite the challenging environment and the death of a fellow soldier. The scene on the right illustrates how soldiers also struggled in warmer climates. The swampy landscape provides different challenges, shown for example by the soldier who got stuck in the mud and is now being rescued by his comrades. A soldier in the back who has also fallen is helped on his feet by another soldier. The support the soldiers provide to one another in the face of adversity expresses a sense of comradery and unity among the troops.

Figure 7: Recreated Long March scenes. Military Museum, "CCP-led Revolutions" virtual exhibition.

The recreation of these scenes in lifelike dioramas is a very powerful communication tool. The detailed and realistic settings bring history alive and enable visitors to witness and almost become a part of this history. As a result, visitors can experience emotional responses, such as pity or respect for the soldiers, which, as discussed before, increases the likelihood that the exhibitions leave lasting impressions.[120] Though it is unlikely that these effects will be as strong for the virtual visitor as they would be for somebody visiting the physical exhibition, the fact that the dioramas are in colour, include great detail and are able to express a story without words through their supposedly realistic representations of history, still means that they have great potential to both impress visitors and to clearly communicate what some of the more threatening scenarios were for the soldiers.

Despite the encouragement of emotional responses, communication can suffer greatly from the clearly biased perspectives within the exhibitions that sceptical visitors will likely notice. The written texts, for instance, often use vocabulary that assigns moral judgements to historical actors and events. Not only does this mean that visitors are very directly informed about what opinions they are expected to have on the history presented to them, but it also leads to the creation of a black and white image. For example, words used throughout the exhibitions to describe the Red Army troops, their cause and their effects on Chinese history include "correct", "right", and "positive". Another example of this clear bias is that all three exhibitions

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[120] Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, 141.

discuss the losses of the Japanese and the KMT during the Civil War years in detail, but not once are these numbers provided for the Red Army. This, in turn, makes the narrative less convincing.

4.3 The good of the CCP

In all three exhibitions, the Communist Party is present in the story on the Civil War years. This presence is especially noticeable in the 'Road to Rejuvenation' exhibition, where the vast majority of portraits, which make up a fourth of all displayed photographs, are of Party members, leaders or founders. [121] Though the Party comes forward in the exhibitions' discussions on the suffering of the Chinese people, the Red Army and the wars, the exhibitions also include specific sections where the role and influence of the CCP during these years is central. These sections describe the CCP as a just party, that provided guidance and strength to the people during this tumultuous period.

One way in which the exhibitions manage to emphasise the good of the CCP, is by repeatedly contrasting the efforts of the Party to the described wrongdoings of the KMT. For example, as discussed before, the exhibitions give all responsibility for the Civil War to the KMT, which is continuously described to "[adhere] to its reactionary policy of autocratic rule and civil war." The Military Museum's exhibition takes this description one step further, as it describes how the KMT immediately turned to war again after the end of the Japanese occupation. A panel states that "After the victory of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, Chiang Kai-shek insisted on dictatorship and attempted to eliminate the armed forces of the CPC and its leadership."[122] This panel's description of Chiang as a dictator, who after winning one war immediately turned to the next, paints a picture of this man and his party as obsessed with power and war. The panel goes on to describe that the CCP, on the other hand, was "striving for peace and democracy". The words used to characterise the CCP are thus the direct opposites of the words used for the KMT – a comparison that also creates a black and white narrative of good versus evil.

The final informative panel of this exhibition, in which the victory of the PLA over the KMT troops is discussed, reads: "In April 1949, the CPC and the KMT restarted peace negotiations for the rapid end of the war and to achieve real peace. However, the KMT

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[121] See the appendix.

[122] See footnote 108.

government refused to sign the Agreement of Domestic Peace." According to this panel, the KMT obstructed an earlier conclusion of the Civil War, the shamefulness of which is emphasised by the surrounding photographs of the destruction of the war and the consequent suffering endured by the people. The panel goes on to detail the strategies employed by the PLA that ultimately resulted in the KMT's defeat. Because the word "liberated" is used to describe the victories of the PLA in multiple areas of the country, the idea of the KMT as a suppressive and aggressive force comes forward once again. Simultaneously, the CCP and its troops are described as freedom fighters. It is important to note that the exhibition does not describe what the conditions of the denied peace agreement were for the KMT. A sceptical visitor might thus be unconvinced by the narrative that the KMT refused to sign the peace agreement because of an insatiable hunger for war.

The KMT is not consistently presented as inherently bad or morally wrong. The collaboration between the KMT and CCP during their fight against the Japanese is acknowledged in the 'Road to Rejuvenation' and 'Three Victories' exhibitions, though only very briefly. Be that as it may, the exhibitions still refrain from describing the role of the KMT in establishing this collaboration or in the fights that followed. The 'Road to Rejuvenation', for instance, includes only one panel on which information on this collaboration can be found. It states that it was the CCP who "proposed the formation of an anti-Japanese national united front based on cooperation between the CPC and KMT," which resulted in the Civil War's ceasefire. In the same panel and the remainder of the exhibition it is implied that, despite this joint effort, it was the CCP who formed the backbone of the resistance against the Japanese, as the KMT immediately disappears from the story on the efforts by and eventual victory of the united front. Similarly, in a label underneath a photograph of Mao in the exhibition from the Nanjing Memorial Hall, it is stated that Mao called for a KMT and CCP coalition "to realize national independence, democracy, freedom and people's wellbeing, which should be the nation's sole mission for now". This informative label depicts Mao as a leader with a strong moral compass who was willing to establish peace with his enemy and join efforts, thus setting differences aside, in order to do what was best for the people's "wellbeing". Again, all credit for the ceasefire talks is given to the CCP, and specifically to Mao.

In contrast to these two virtual exhibitions, the Military Museum only hints at the collaboration. The big informative panels that introduce visitors to and inform them on the exhibition's displays do not mention the collaboration at any point, even when one of these panels is accompanied by a photograph of a meeting between Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek. Because the informative label underneath this image is in Chinese only, foreign visitors

might not understand that this photo represents a collaboration. Some might not even recognise one or both of the pictured political figures. It is only in a later panel that the collaboration is indirectly mentioned. This panel states that "the KMT government tore up the armistice agreement and launched an attack on liberated areas." The text on this panel might cause some confusion because the armistice agreement is not explained to foreign visitors anywhere. Information on what the armistice agreement was and when and by who it was signed is missing entirely, but this context is needed to understand this panel. Furthermore, this panel once again depicts the KMT as war hungry. The description of the KMT 'tearing up' the armistice agreement conveys that the KMT deliberately chose war once again by attacking people who were only briefly able to enjoy peace and safety in what were "liberated areas".

The image that is sketched of the CCP as a peace-loving party doing whatever is best for the Chinese people is only strengthened by the exhibitions' continuous references to good deeds done and aid provided by the CCP during this period. For example, the Military Museum's virtual exhibition includes a section dedicated to illustrating the natural disasters that occurred in war-torn areas during the Civil War that resulted in severe food shortages. This section also includes images of CCP members and Red Army troops assisting farmers, offering food and healthcare to those in need, and providing reading and writing classes (figure 8). These photos indicate the CCP's efforts to help the people when needed and its willingness to invest in the development of the country.

Figure 8: CCP teaching peasants to read and write. Military Museum, "CCP-led Revolutions" virtual exhibition.

The Nanjing Memorial Hall's exhibition also offers examples of the CCP providing care to those in need. In the middle of the exhibition, directly after visitors are introduced to some of the war crimes committed by the Japanese on Chinese soil, a collage of images shows how Jewish refugees from Europe found shelter and safety in some of China's biggest cities. This display might lead to an improvement of visitors' opinions on the CCP, as this section of the exhibition expresses the Party's willingness to help people from other countries, despite the many challenges they and the Chinese people were facing themselves. The idea of the CCP being committed to helping people in need is extended beyond Chinese people or those within China's borders. The Party is therefore indirectly described as an international humanitarian party.

The exhibitions from the Military Museum and the Nanjing Memorial Hall also portray the CCP positively when describing the Party's role during the aftermath of the Japanese occupation. In the sections of the exhibitions that delve into this period, a theme of justice comes forward through the depiction of tribunals where Japanese war criminals were prosecuted. These tribunals are continuously linked to the CCP. Whereas the Military Museum mostly informs its audience on these tribunals through photographs taken at the scene, the Nanjing Memorial Hall provides detailed information on how China moved on from the "atrocities" inflicted on its population. The aftermath of the Japanese occupation becomes a significant element of the exhibition's story on China's modern history, as approximately half of its space is dedicated to the prosecution of war criminals.

The 'The Three Victories' exhibition provides visitors with information on the prosecution of German, Italian and Japanese war criminals. The section of the exhibition on this prosecution begins by discussing international trials centred on the European war experience, including the Nuremberg trials. It then quickly turns to the prosecution of Japanese war criminals, both within and outside of China. In addition to images of tribunal hearings, a small recreated jail cell symbolically illustrates how Japanese war criminals became prisoners, as their portraits are hung behind bars. Besides their names, no information on who these criminals were and what they did is provided. The exhibition then turns to local history, as visitors are made to walk through the doors of a life-size model of the building where the Nanjing war crimes trial took place (figure 9). Upon entering, visitors see a recreation of the court room (figure 10). Perhaps even more so than was the case for the realistic dioramas of battles and the Long March, visitors become a part of history as they enter and walk through this recreated historic tribunal themselves. A large painting illustrates what the tribunal looked like during the hearings, which further enhances visitors' ability to picture this history unfolding

in the space they find themselves in. The virtual exhibition even places visitors in the midst of this tribunal setting, on the platform where the defendant took place. This is an area that visitors of the physical exhibition cannot enter due to it being sectioned off by glass panels. Though virtual visitors might not fully experience this sense of walking through history, considering that they observe the tribunal setting through a computer screen, it is clear that the curators have considered how they could enhance the virtual experience to some extent.

Figure 9: Tribunal building. Nanjing Memorial Hall, "The Three Victories" virtual exhibition.

Figure 10: The inside of the tribunal building. Nanjing Memorial Hall, "The Three Victories" virtual exhibition.

A panel with an English translation next to this recreated tribunal informs visitors on the role of the CCP in the prosecution of not only war criminals, but also of Chinese traitors. This is the first and only time in all three exhibitions that it is acknowledged that some Chinese citizens supported the Japanese during the occupation period. It reads: "After the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, the CPC was the earliest to call for punishment of Chinese traitors and arrest and try traitors in liberated areas. In September 1945, the Nationalist Government began to arrest traitors around the country." This quote indicates how the exhibition struggles to emphasise the role of the CCP in the prosecution whilst simultaneously having to acknowledge that the KMT ultimately put the traitors to trial. By highlighting that the CCP pushed for the arrest of traitors and their prosecution, the exhibition still manages to credit the CCP with this act of justice.

The tribunal setting is surrounded by images depicting the trials and the actual punishments that followed. These photographs mimic those of the war crimes committed by these very criminals as shown in the beginning of the exhibition, as they similarly depict gruesome scenes, specifically of executions. For example, one large photograph pictures a man being shot through his head by a soldier as hundreds of people watch (figure 11). This is a very similar image to the one discussed before of the public beheading of Chinese men by a Japanese soldier. Visitors are confronted once again with photographs of people who have been or are being killed. Despite knowing that the bodies are those of alleged criminals who committed the crimes visitors were confronted with before, these photographs are still shocking. They come to function as proof that those guilty of the described "atrocities to humanity" ultimately faced consequences for their actions and were not left unpunished.

Figure 11: Prosecution of Japanese war criminals. Nanjing Memorial Hall, "The Three Victories" virtual exhibition.

The exhibition almost seems to counter these depictions of brutality that have become intertwined with the justice narrative. It does so by highlighting that the CCP showed mercy to some Japanese after the war. For example, an entire wall is dedicated to illustrating the "humanitarian transformation of Japanese war criminals in China." Text on an informative panel describes how, when the PRC was established by the CCP, many Japanese criminals were given amnesty and were allowed to travel back to Japan. One of the images on this wall depicts a sick war criminal who, whilst awaiting trial and during his time as a prisoner, received proper health care. In a later section on Japan-China relations after the war, it is stated how the CCP "adopted a lenient policy towards Japanese immigrants and prisoners of war, and sent them back to Japan, and kindly treated Japanese orphans in China." This panel is accompanied by images of these Japanese orphans with big smiles on their faces, thus 'proofing' how well the CCP treated them. This section also emphasises that the CCP "took active actions to promote Sino-Japanese friendship" as soon as the PRC was founded to normalise relations and fully 'move on' from the past. All in all, these sections of the exhibition on the aftermath of the Japanese occupation communicate a narrative that is centred on the mercifulness and forgiving nature of the CCP.

By focusing on the strong morals of the CCP and its ability to lead the people during challenging times, the exhibitions' story of the Civil War years manages to indirectly provide arguments in favour of the CCP's legitimacy. One way in which this is done is by the continuous emphasis on the Party's close collaboration with and consequent support from the people. The National Museum and the Military Museum continuously describe the CCP as the people's "tower of strength" during the wars against the KMT and the Japanese. According to this description, the CCP was a supporter of the people, rather than a leader dictating what would be done. The Party is thus depicted as an entity that motivated and helped the people to achieve their objectives. The exhibitions also never state that the victories over the Japanese and the KMT were because of the CCP. Instead, the Party is described to have listened and provided what was needed to the people in order to win the wars. The Military Museum, for example, continuously highlights how the CCP developed successful military strategies that ultimately enabled the people to defeat the KMT and the Japanese. Within this narrative, the relationship between the CCP and the people is central. Not only does this emphasise once again how the CCP's main objective is to serve the people, it also sets the tone for the final narrative of the exhibitions' story, which centres on the public support the Party received and the great national unity that followed.

4.4 Nationwide support and unity

One major narrative in the stories of the exhibitions is the popular support for the CCP and the consequent creation of a nation. All three exhibitions feature a significant amount of photographs depicting political rallies.[123] In the Nanjing Memorial Hall, 74 photographs showcase large masses celebrating the end of the Japanese occupation and WWII around the world (figure 12). Images of celebrations in the West are presented next to those of the celebrations in China, therefore drawing connections between both celebrations. The people are dancing, cheering and raising their fists in the air in celebratory fashion. Some have big smiles on their faces whilst others cry. The virtual exhibitions from the National Museum and the Military Museum also include photographs of political rallies, 15 and 31 respectively. These photos, however, depict large groups of people listening to speeches from CCP members, such as Mao Zedong, whilst holding banners with Chinese slogans or big red flags. Most of the people in the pictures have stern facial expressions, as if to communicate that they are set in their support for the CCP.
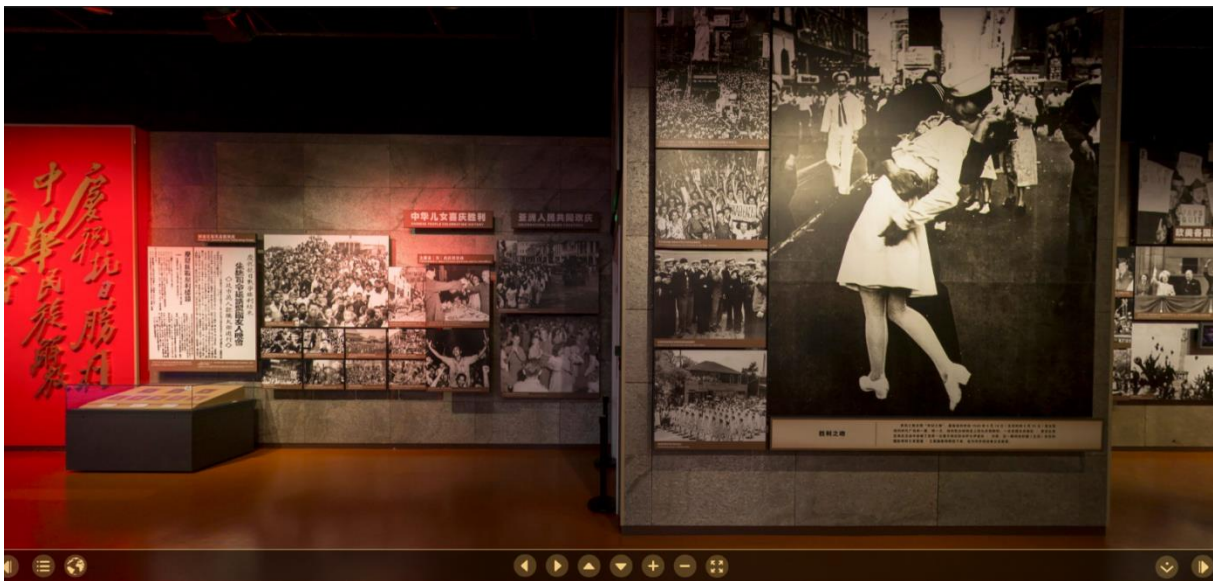

Figure 12: Celebrating victory. Nanjing Memorial Hall, 'The Three Victories' virtual exhibition.

All three exhibitions' images of political rallies showcase the sizable coming together of the Chinese people, whether it is to celebrate the defeat of the Japanese or to show their support for the Party. These depictions of the masses expressing their shared opinions on a historical event or a political party communicates a sense of solidarity amongst large groups of

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[123] See the appendix.

people in this pivotal moment in China's history. These images are only one example of the exhibitions' recurrent presentation of the unity of the Chinese people and their *en masse* approval for the CCP during and because of this historic period.

As stated before, the exhibitions never directly claim that China's 'liberation' from the decades of Japanese occupation and leadership by the KMT was because of the CCP. Instead, the narrative continuously highlights that the troops and civilians were of utmost importance. For example, in all three exhibitions, the fight against the Japanese is described as "the nationwide war of resistance." The word 'nationwide' implies that every person in China was to some extent affected by and involved in the fight against the Japanese. The Japanese are thus described to have been a common enemy for everybody within China's borders during these decades. This description leaves no room for a discussion on Chinese citizens benefiting from or collaborating with the Japanese. The existence of traitors is only mentioned once across all three exhibitions, and that is in the Nanjing Memorial Hall's description of their prosecution. The description also prevents a discussion on the likely very different experiences and responses to the war of people in territories far removed from occupied areas. In short, this narrative implies that the occupation period was experienced in the same way by all Chinese people, and that the entire population approved of and was united in the fight against the Japanese.

A panel in the Military Museum enhances this narrative of unity. It reads: "troops and civilians at the base area kept fighting in the battlefield behind enemy lines despite hardships." The quote implies that troops and civilians collaborated on the battlefields and fought the Japanese together. This turns the battle scenes, which are presented to visitors throughout the exhibitions, into fights that involved a wide array of people, not just soldiers or the elites. The fight against the Japanese is therefore described as a total war, where civilians were not only impacted by its consequences, as described in the exhibition's depiction of the suffering of civilians at the hands of the Japanese, but also because they actively participated in the fights themselves. Moreover, this panel links the heroism narrative, which frequently comes forward in the exhibitions' depiction of Red Army troops, to civilians as well. Because the quote mentions how the efforts on the battlefield by civilians continued "despite hardships", the civilians are, similar to soldiers, characterised as determined fighters who were willing to struggle and suffer in order to defeat the Japanese.

This narrative of the collaboration between civilians and soldiers is underlined in a diorama in the exhibition's section on the final years of the Civil War (figure 8). This diorama depicts, what appears to be, a rural area of China, as farming equipment is scattered around the

sparse grey buildings and some figures are wearing peasant clothing. The armed figures and the burning boat in the distance give off the impression that this is unsafe territory with a nearby enemy. On the bottom right, a soldier is seen emerging from what appears to be an underground hiding spot whilst aiming his gun. On the left, two figures dressed as peasants are digging a hole, perhaps to build more underground hiding spots, whilst another man dressed in similar clothing guards them with his weapon. This diorama illustrates the described collaboration between civilians and troops as, in addition to the civilians supporting the troops by offering hiding places to them, the civilians are shown to have armed themselves. This indicates that they fought alongside the Red Army.

Figure 13: Diorama of farmers collaborating with Red Army troops. Military Museum, 'The CCP-led Revolutions' virtual exhibition.

The same panel from the Military Museum discussed above emphasises the collaboration between soldiers and civilians as well as the hardships they experienced in the following sentence: "Mingled with successive years of natural disasters, all these adverse factors added to the extreme difficulties faced by the war of resistance behind enemy lines. In order to overcome the difficulties, under the unified leadership of the CPC, the army and the people mobilized all positive factors, gave full play to the overall strength of the Party, government and army and people, and waged arduous struggles…". This panel's insistence on mentioning the natural disasters that occurred during the war underlines the narrative of suffering, both for civilians and soldiers, as it is described to have "added to the extreme difficulties faced by the war of resistance". This quote's reference to the guiding role of the

CCP and how, because of this guidance, the army and people were able to unite and fight the Japanese together is especially telling. By mentioning how troops and civilians cooperated "under the unified leadership of the CPC", the CCP is portrayed as a consolidating actor that enabled the Chinese people to come together and effectively collaborate to achieve their shared objective.

The other two virtual exhibitions adhere to the narrative of national unification under the guidance of the CCP. A panel from the Nanjing Memorial Hall, for instance, states that "in a time when the Chinese nation was in critical difficulties, the Chinese people and overseas Chinese, regardless of political parties, ethnic groups, social classes, and identities, [were] united together under the banner of the Chinese United Front against Japanese Aggression […]. The CPC proposed and established the Chinese United Front against Japanese Aggression." This quote highlights how it was the shared experience of adversity among the Chinese population, both within and outside of the country, that made a unification of an extremely diverse and large population possible. This was because they had one objective in common; defeating the Japanese. Furthermore, the Party is described as the reason why this unification occurred, as the panel establishes that it was the CCP who took the initiative to establish that what was needed to bring the people together in practice, namely the united front. Following this quote's narrative, there would not have been this sense of national unity, which is described to have played a critical role in defeating the Japanese, without the CCP.

The National Museum communicates this idea of the CCP's crucial role on the final panel of the exhibition that discusses China's Civil War history. It reads: "After the founding of the People's Republic of China […] national independence, liberation of the people and the great unity of China's ethnic groups were achieved." This quote links the coming to power of the CCP and the consequent founding of the PRC to the 'liberation' of China and, once again, to the unification of the entire population. As a result, the narrative asserts that although the Chinese people are very culturally diverse, they were able to unite because of the CCP's victory over the Japanese and the KMT, or because of the people's shared support and admiration for the Party and the creation of this new state, which provided common ground to these different groups.

To summarise, the exhibitions include and emphasise the role of the people in the grand story of China's Civil War history. Not only are they described to have been of massive importance in defeating both the Japanese and KMT by supporting and fighting alongside the Red Army, the relations between the people across China are also described to have forever changed during and because of these years. Following this narrative, it was the support from

the people for the CCP and its objective to liberate China that ultimately resulted in the unification of this diverse country, which consequently enabled the birth of a nation. By presenting this narrative to foreign visitors, the virtual exhibitions indirectly communicate why the CCP should be considered the legitimate leader of China. This legitimacy is the result of more than just the Party 'liberating' the people, as it is described to also stem from the overwhelming support the Communist Party received ever since its founding and its ability to turn a torn country into a united nation-state.

Chapter 5: The virtual exhibitions as soft power tools

In order to discuss the virtual exhibitions' potential to have soft power effects on their foreign visitors, this research considered communication obstacles, in terms of visitor experience and content, that the exhibitions faced. Overall, it found that there are three main obstacles, each present in all three virtual exhibitions, that prevent clear and therefore convincing communication of the exhibitions' story on Chinese modern history to foreign virtual visitors. These obstacles are the lack of good mechanics and design, lack of available information in English, and the lack of necessary context. This chapter will also discuss an obstacle outside of the virtual exhibitions themselves that also limits their soft power potential: the lack of international promotion.

5.1 Lack of good mechanics and design

The most prominent obstacle for successful communication in all three virtual exhibitions is their reliance on traditional communication strategies, that are also employed in physical exhibitions, that are unmatched by the exhibitions' affordances. Visitors of the virtual exhibitions are therefore often unable to engage with the tools used for this communication. This is mostly due to the exhibitions' low resolutions and mobility issues that hinder visitors from reading texts and observing objects or photographs.

All three exhibitions show marks on the floor that, when clicked on, 'teleport' visitors to that location. This is the mechanism visitors need to use to move through and observe the exhibition. As can been seen in figure 14, there is a limited number of teleportation marks in any given space. Because visitors can only view the exhibitions' content by 'standing' on these predetermined marks, their mobility is limited. This means that visitors are sometimes made to observe images, dioramas, objects and written texts from awkward angles or from a great distance. This, in addition to the low resolutions of the exhibitions, result in some exhibition content becoming difficult or even impossible to observe and read. As the virtual exhibitions are designed to replicate a traditional museum visit, and therefore rely on the same communication strategies as the exhibitions' physical counterparts do, these very objects and images hung on walls or presented in display cases are very important for the exhibitions' storytelling. Whereas visitors of the physical versions of these exhibitions would be able to stand directly in front of or close to any object, image or informative panel, the virtual visitor often cannot. A lot of information and elements of the story are therefore lost.

Figure 144: Teleportation marks. Military Museum, "CCP-led Revolutions" virtual exhibition.

This mobility issue is especially prominent in the virtual exhibitions from the Nanjing Memorial Hall and the National Museum. The latter only includes a very limited amount of teleportation marks, which means that visitors are occasionally made to observe entire sections of the exhibition from only one position. For example, figure 15 is a screenshot taken from the only position from where visitors can see this nook in the exhibition. Virtual visitors are thus made to observe twenty-three photographs, a small collection of objects, and a large informative panel from only this point of view. This position not only results in a decreased readability of the panel because of the created awkward angle, it also leads to virtual visitors having to zoom in quite extensively in order to be able to decipher what the objects are and what the photographs depict.

Figure 15: Screenshot from the exhibition. National Museum, "Road to Rejuvenation" virtual exhibition.

Especially the virtual visitors' ability to observe objects is continuously obstructed because of these mobility issues, which is the reason why objects and the narrative communicated through them were barely discussed in the previous chapter. Figures 15 and 16 demonstrate how the affordances of the National Museum and Nanjing Memorial Hall's virtual exhibitions make some objects 'invisible'. Because these virtual exhibitions are digital copies of their physical counterparts, objects often remain traditionally displayed in cabinets. Whereas visitors of the physical exhibition can loom over the cabinets to observe the objects from above or up close, the virtual visitor is unable to. Furthermore, the position of the virtual visitor is occasionally so far removed from the display cabinet that the objects cannot be seen at all. Even when the virtual visitor is able to see what type of object is displayed, for example a document or weapon, they cannot observe the object's details or read the accompanying label that provides information on what the object or its significance is. The object consequently becomes devoid of any context or link to the presented history.

The Military Museum's virtual exhibition is the exception. Visitors are able to click on some of the exhibition's display cabinets to open a small window that shows scans and photographs of the objects in the cabinet (figure 17). Though this does enable visitors to examine the objects and their details up close, the objects remain 'narrativeless' to the foreign visitor as all descriptions are only available in Chinese.

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Figure 16: Object displays. Nanjing Memorial Hall, "The Three Victories" virtual exhibition.
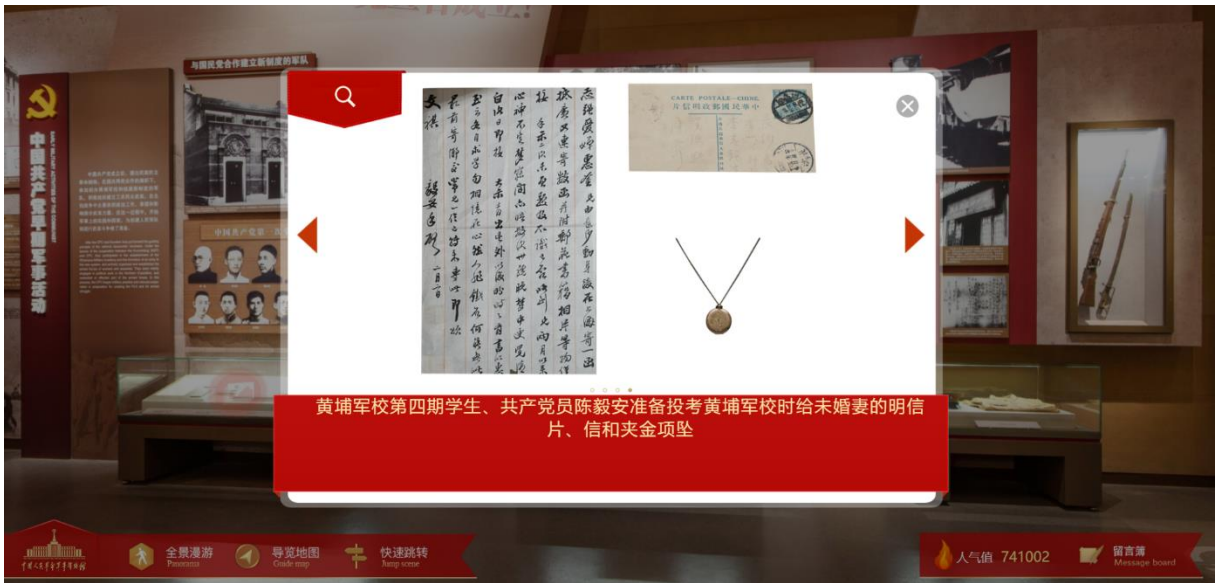

Figure 17: Scans and photographs of objects. Military Museum, "CCP-led Revolutions" virtual exhibition.

The mobility mechanisms of the exhibitions lead to yet another issue. The National Museum, with its very minimal teleportation marks, restrains the act of simply 'walking' through the virtual exhibition because it does not allow visitors to take a step back and return to the previous mark. Visitors can instead only move forward. If visitors, for example, want to refer to a previous panel, they have to scroll through a long list of screenshots taken from the perspective of each teleportation mark to find the location they wish to return to (figure 18). This is made especially challenging by the fact that these screenshots not only depict one angle

per location, and thus might not show the exact thing visitors are looking for making the locations difficult to recognise, but also because this list disappears after less than five seconds of scrolling. Virtual visitors might therefore have to reopen this list multiple times to hastily scroll and analyse the tiny screenshots that appear at the bottom of their screen in order to find the exact location they wish to 'travel' to.

Figure 18: Finding your way back. National Museum, "Road to Rejuvenation" virtual exhibition.

The exhibition from the Military Museum, on the other hand, proves that too much mobility can also negatively impact visitor experience and overall communication. Because all nearby transportation marks are visible at all times, the visitor is free to decide what path they take. The lack of additional directional help that a physical visit would offer, for example in the form of an audio tour that guides visitors from location to location or the pathways of other visitors, can make this virtual visit confusing. The storyline of the exhibition might as a result get lost. For example, upon entering the exhibition, visitors can choose if they want to turn left or right. Visitors who turn left will observe the exhibition's content in chronological order. They will first receive a small introduction on the exhibition itself followed by information on the years leading up to the Civil War. When turning right, visitors begin their tour in the midst of the exhibition's depiction of the fight against the Japanese and will then travel back in time to a discussion of earlier decades. For those who are unfamiliar with Chinese history, this will be a very confusing experience as the chronological order of history is lost. This unclarity of where to go due to the abundance of transportation marks remains an issue throughout the exhibition as visitors encounter crossroads on multiple occasions.

This exhibition's extensive mobility especially becomes a problem at two specific points in the exhibition that are designed in the same way, one of which is depicted in figure 19. The white transportation mark on the right invites the visitor to continue through the exhibition in this direction. However, visitors should actually walk through the open doors on the left first, which leads to a big white room, to continue their virtual tour in chronological order. At the end of this massive white room, visitors can enter a small additional section of the exhibition. Because the white room does not match the design of the exhibition, thus making it appear as an exit, and because the white transportation mark in front of the visitor stands out more than the transportation in the white room due to it being presented on a dark background, the additional exhibition space can easily be missed. When visitors do not turn left and instead go straight ahead, they will experience a significant time jump in the exhibition's content. For example, one of these separate exhibition spaces delves into the Long March and introduces the years of Japanese occupation. Upon returning to the main exhibition hall, visitors will then learn more about the fight against the Japanese that ensued. If visitors have not walked through the separate exhibition space first, they miss out on a significant part of Chinese Civil War history and will not receive any context on the Japanese occupation that is needed to understand the history presented in the next section of the exhibition.

Figure 19: Unclarity in trajectory. Military Museum, "CCP-led Revolutions" virtual exhibition.

The technology and design limitations of the three exhibitions also worsen visitor experience and obstruct communication in ways unrelated to mobility. A clear example is that video footage, presented on screens, is unplayable in the National Museum and the Nanjing Memorial Hall's exhibitions. Visitors see that there is a video screen, but they cannot click on it to watch a video. Instead, it appears frozen. Not only does this mean that the information included in the videos is lost, it also shows that the virtual exhibitions were somewhat carelessly put together as these elements were not considered. Only the Military Museum's exhibition offers playable videos. However, similar to their object display design, the videos are in Chinese only. Because the videos present images and Chinese slogans accompanied by a Chinese voiceover, they only provide new uncontextualized imagery to those who do not speak the language. The videos therefore fail to contribute to the narrative presented to foreigners. Another major issue is the loading time. It occasionally takes more than ten seconds for the websites of all three museums to load the next section of their exhibitions.[124] During this research, the Nanjing Memorial Hall's website even crashed multiple times and refused to load certain sections of the exhibition. This faltering accessibility can lead to frustration among virtual visitors.

To sum up, the virtual visitor might find their tour of any of the three exhibitions a rather frustrating experience. This can be due to their inability to conveniently move around the exhibitions or to comfortably observe their content. This frustration can in turn lead to some visitors not completing their virtual tour. Considering that these exhibitions require the virtual visitor to remain interested in and willing to walk through the exhibitions to communicate with them, this will be detrimental to their overall soft power effects.

5.2 Lack of available information in English

Another major obstacle in the communication with foreign visitors, is the virtual exhibitions' occasional lack of accessible information in English, or any language other than Chinese. Details of the history and the exhibitions' stories are consequently often lost to foreign visitors.

Neither the Military Museum nor the National Museum offer any translated object and photograph labels. This means that foreign visitors' ability to recognise objects or pictured politicians, locations and specific historic events determines if the exhibitions manage to inform these visitors and if these objects and photographs succeed in supporting or enhancing the

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[124] This research was conducted in the Netherlands. The speed of the websites may be different in China or other countries.

information that is translated. In other words, successful communication depends on visitors' pre-existing knowledge on or familiarity with Chinese modern history in these cases. An example where foreign visitors are made to deduce information to understand a displayed photograph is, as mentioned before, the Military Museum's presentation of the armistice agreement between the KMT and the CCP. This is never explicitly mentioned in the English translations – it only comes forward on a Chinese label below an image of a meeting between Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek. Therefore, if a foreign visitor does not recognise these political figures or is unaware of their temporary armistice and collaboration, they will miss out on this piece of information and not understand what this photograph represents.

Including translations of labels beneath photographs is not always required to communicate with foreign visitors through these visual storytelling tools. Foreign visitors might occasionally be able to deduce certain pieces of information by simply looking at the photographs. For example, the photograph collages of mass graves and public executions clearly illustrate the suffering of the Chinese people during the Japanese occupation that is mentioned on translated informative panels. These collages therefore do not necessarily need labels to inform visitors on what the photographs represent as they speak for themselves. These photographs therefore successfully support the written narrative, even when specifics remain untranslated.

The lack of label translations really becomes an issue when documents are pictured. The Military Museum and the Nanjing Memorial Hall include many scans of important documents such as letters, orders and speeches.[125] Because these documents are in Chinese, a translation is required for visitors who do not speak the language to understand what type of document they are looking at, what their historic significance is, and, of course, what is written on them. The Military Museum does not provide any translated information on these documents despite them taking up almost 10% of all visuals in the exhibition.[126] The Nanjing Memorial Hall does provide short English descriptions to inform visitors on what type of document it is and what it communicates, though these translations are less detailed than the Chinese descriptions. Furthermore, these labels are either extremely difficult or impossible to read due to the exhibition's low resolution. As a result, this frequently used visual storytelling tool becomes meaningless and ineffective when presented to foreigners.

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[125] See the appendix.

[126] See the appendix.

The Nanjing Memorial Hall's virtual exhibition has considered its English-speaking audience the most, as it provides significantly more translations than the Military Museum and National Museum do. Unlike the other two exhibitions, the 'The Three Victories' does include English labels beneath most photographs and objects. Only the labels below portraits often remain untranslated. It is therefore a shame that the resolution of the exhibition occasionally prohibits foreign visitors from reading the labels and receiving this information. This exhibition does, however, continuously exclude foreign visitors from the information on smaller panels, hung amidst photographs, documents, maps and propaganda posters, that provide more detailed information on the visuals that surround them. For example, the brown Chinese panels pictured in figure 20 accompany photographs of battlefields and provide more information on how each battle unfolded. These panels include information on the battle strategies employed, the number of casualties, the names of generals or famous soldiers who were present, and on the importance of the battle in the overall fight against the Japanese. Foreign visitors who do not speak Chinese will not be able to read this information and are left with the small, translated labels below the photographs. These translations are much less detailed, as they only list where and when the pictured battle took place. A lot of information is consequently lost to the foreign visitor, information that is provided to Chinese speaking audiences. As a result, an imbalance is created.

Figure 20: Lack of information in English. Nanjing Memorial Hall, "The Three Victories" virtual exhibition.

Because the foreign visitor is often excluded from detailed information, the exhibitions mostly communicate surface-level history to this audience. The large informative panels that do provide English translations, and which in most museums only provide an overview of what visitors will learn and observe in detail in the following sections of the exhibition, therefore become the main or even sole information providers. Foreign visitors are consequently unable to gain in-depth understandings of Chinese modern history.

Whereas some sections of the exhibitions become somewhat unclear or vague because of the lack of translation, others become entirely incomprehensible. This occurs in the National Museum's representation of the Long March. A map that shows the route taken by the CCP troops and photographs of these troops and the landscapes they encountered are hung on a wall dedicated to this history. The display also includes multiple objects used by soldiers during the march (figure 21). Because the Long March is never mentioned in English on the guiding panels and because the display of this history does not include any translations, foreign visitors unfamiliar with Chinese history will not understand what this display represents. Because the map, objects and photographs are provided without any information, they are devoid of any context and thus lack historical significance. The closest panel that does provide information in English discusses the fight against the Japanese occupation. Foreign visitors might thus consider and try to understand the section on the Long March in this context, rather than as an event linked to the Civil War against the KMT. The exhibition therefore fails to communicate this history to its foreign visitors.

Figure 21: Long March presentation. National Museum, "Road to Rejuvenation" virtual exhibition.

The lack of accessible information in English in all three virtual exhibitions can lead to frustration among foreign visitors. In addition to this translation issue directly obstructing communication because of the created confusion or unclarity, visitors might also feel excluded due to them not having access to details or certain sections of the exhibitions. Foreign visitors might even get the impression that the virtual exhibitions mostly, if not only, cater to Chinese speaking visitors and that others have not been considered. The distance between content and foreign audience is somewhat surprising, considering that all English websites of the museums provide access to these exhibitions. This implies that the exhibitions are also meant to inform foreign audiences. It is a possibility that the physical counterparts of these virtual exhibitions provide audio tours to their foreign visitors to accommodate the lack of written translations. Either way, it is clear that the curators of the virtual exhibitions did not consider this imbalance of information provision to Chinese- and English-speaking visitors, as no audio tours or other services are provided to the foreign virtual visitor. This, similar to the design and mechanics of the virtual exhibitions, shows that the curators did not thoroughly contemplate how to best communicate with their foreign audiences through this online medium.

5.3 Lack of necessary context

In some instances, foreign visitors might still struggle to comprehend the discussed history despite there being translations. This is due to the exhibitions not providing contextual information needed to understand the story.

Museum curators must consider what information their audience is familiar with, and which can therefore be left out, and what information needs to be included in the exhibition so that visitors can understand the story.[127] If they are unsuccessful, visitors will either not be able to fully understand the narrative and objects on display, or feel bored when the exhibition becomes repetitive or fails to entice the visitor with new and interesting information. This means that the museum must consider its audiences carefully, which is a challenging task because of the heterogeneity of the museum public due to the coming together of different backgrounds, interests and preferences.[128] The three exhibitions analysed in this project all struggle to accommodate the differences in familiarity with Chinese modern history between

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[127] Mary Jane Calderon, "Museums and Communication," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 18, no. 2 (1990): 137.

[128] Free de Backer, Jeltsen Peeters, Ankelien Kindekens, Dorien Brosens, Willem Elias, and Koen Lombaerts, "Adult Visitors in Museum Learning Environments," *Social and Behavioural Sciences* 191, no. 1 (2015): 153.

their domestic and international visitors. One clear example of this is that in all three exhibitions it is never explained what the KMT is. Visitors who are unfamiliar with the KMT are left to deduce from panels scattered around the exhibitions that this is a political party that governed China during the Civil War period, fought the CCP, and ultimately fled to Taiwan after its defeat. What the party's role was in Chinese history before the Civil War period, for instance in relation to the fall of the Qing dynasty, or how the KMT initially rose to power remains undiscussed. This lack of information might result in foreign visitors not understanding what the KMT is, what the party stood for, or, most importantly, why exactly it was wrapped up in a Civil War with the CCP. When one does not know this basic background information, understanding the exhibitions' entire discussion of the Civil War becomes rather difficult.

The Military Museum's first panel is a good example of a text that needs to provide more contextual information. It reads: "Under the cooperation between the Kuomintang (KMT) and CPC, [the CPC] participated in the establishment of the Whampoa Military Academy and the formation of an army in the new system […] They were mainly engaged in political work in the Northern Expedition, and controlled or affected part of the armed forces." A foreign visitor who reads this panel might become very confused. What is the Kuomintang? What is the new system? What is the Northern Expedition? These questions remain unanswered as the surrounding objects and images do not offer translations that help foreigners piece the puzzle together. Furthermore, the information that English speakers receive after this panel only makes the narrative more confusing. It is mentioned in the following panels that the CCP began an armed uprising, but it is not mentioned against who or for what reason. Only much later does the exhibition explain that the CCP was fighting the KMT. Again, this can cause confusion as visitors previously learned that the KMT collaborated with the CCP to establish a military academy. What turned these two groups into enemies?

The National Museum also fails to include contextual information, which similarly results in unclarity. This happens not because referenced events or groups remain unexplained, as is the case for the Military Museum, but because of time jumps and narrative gaps. For example, the exhibition first discusses the earlier years of the Civil War in detail. It then suddenly turns to the fight against the Japanese occupation, after which the narrative immediately switches to the Civil War again. The exhibition never explains when, where or why the Japanese occupation began, meaning that the visitor is only introduced to the fact that the Japanese were in China when the fight against them is discussed. Furthermore, because the discussion of this history is squashed in between a consistent narrative of Civil War, the Japanese occupation seems to appear out of thin air and disappear just as fast. Although the

exhibition follows a chronological order, the links between different historic events are missing. Because the exhibition's narrative does not explain how one event led to the next or how different events are intertwined, and because different historic events are presented directly next to each other or without a clear separation or introduction, the story becomes blurry and any cause-effect relations between events that explain how history unfolded are lost.

The Nanjing Memorial Hall's communication with foreign visitors does not suffer as much from this lack of context, despite some ambiguity regarding who was governing China and leading the country's resistance during the discussed history. This is because the general story is more familiar to many international visitors. Every piece of information that the virtual visitor encounters in this exhibition is placed in an international framework of WWII, and references to American, European and Asian war experiences are included throughout. As a result, foreign visitors are likely to already possess basic knowledge of the history on display and are encouraged to think about their own country's WWII history, which in turn enables them to better understand the Chinese experience.

In short, because the virtual exhibitions of the National Museum and Military Museum fail to provide detailed translated information that takes the extent of familiarity with Chinese modern history of foreign visitors into account, successful communication of the displayed history to this audience is obstructed. Missing explanations or links between different historical events make the narrative confusing at best.

5.4 Lack of exhibition promotion

One final issue that hinders the exhibitions' communication with foreign virtual visitors is the overall lack of their promotion. Although this issue lies beyond the virtual exhibitions themselves, it does directly impact their possible soft power effects. That is because the communication relies on interested parties not only finding the virtual exhibitions online, but also on them being interested enough to walk through the exhibitions and engage with their materials. This means that possible visitors need to be made aware of and interested in these virtual exhibitions. This research does not aim to conduct systematic research into media reporting on or social media promotion of the virtual exhibitions. However, by googling the names of the virtual exhibitions, the museums or the term "China's virtual exhibitions" in general, it becomes apparent that only a few news and website articles have been written about Chinese museums' virtual exhibitions. These were all published during the COVID-19 pandemic and describe the virtual exhibitions as the museums' response to this global health

crisis, during which people could no longer visit museums in person. The three exhibitions discussed in this thesis are not mentioned and promoted in these articles, as the writers focus on culture, rather than history, exhibitions. The virtual exhibitions that are repeatedly mentioned are from the National Museum of Arts and the Forbidden City.[129]

Though it is impossible to know for certain how many people have visited or are aware of the three exhibitions discussed in this thesis, the Military Museum's exhibition does offer some insight into this because of its interactive options. At the bottom-right corner of the screen, visitors can click on the message board icon, which opens a small window where people can leave and read comments on the exhibition. The counter next to it indicates how many people have allegedly visited the virtual exhibition in total. Though this number has increased over the course of this research project, as the many screenshots included in this paper show, the virtual exhibition is unlikely to enjoy great interaction beyond, perhaps, a quick visit. The message board only contains forty-five comments in Chinese, the newest dating back to 2020. This can be indicative of how few foreign visitors have passed through the exhibition as well as of how only a very small number of people feel inclined to leave a comment. Interaction with the exhibition, especially from a foreign audience, therefore appears to be very limited.

Considering these factors, it is unlikely that the exhibitions analysed in this thesis reach a broad audience. When there is no or very little engagement with the exhibitions, communication and consequently any soft power effects will be very limited.

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[129] Maggie Hiuhu Wong, "With Travelers Unable to Visit due to the Coronavirus Outbreak, China's Museums Put Exhibitions Online," *CNN Travel,* last modified February 4, 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/chinese-museums-online-exhibits/index.html;

Richard Whiddington, "Virtual Tours and Gamification: China's Museums Pivot Content for Coronavirus," *Jing Culture and Crypto,* February 14, 2020, https://jingculturecrypto.com/virtual-tours-gamification-online-exhibitions-chinas-museums-coronavirus/;

Huaxia, "Virtual Museum Tours Enrich Lives in Epidemic," *Xinhua* May 18, 2022, https://english.news.cn/20220518/4be9f1f9cac348c1a4314b4aa6d4e3b2/c.html;

Lin, "Museums Across China."

Chapter 6: Discussion and conclusion

This thesis aimed to answer two research questions: what narratives on the CCP's rise to power are presented to foreign visitors of China's virtual exhibitions, and do these virtual exhibitions and the narratives presented within them have the potential to have any soft power effects on this audience? As this thesis' literature review showed, many IR and China studies scholars have researched government-promoted domestic narratives on Chinese modern history before, also within the museum context. However, discussions on how this history is presented to foreign audiences and what effects or objectives this presentation can have were never included. Analysing Chinese museum narratives that are presented to foreigners has become an extremely relevant research topic, as multiple state-owned museums have recently developed virtual exhibitions that provide access to CCP-favoured narratives on Chinese history and culture to anyone from anywhere in the world. As a result, the museums' potential demographic has changed significantly - from Chinese citizens and international travellers to anybody with an internet connection. Observing these exhibitions' communication with foreigners is therefore more relevant than ever. Furthermore, published works on Chinese museum narratives have thus far neglected to systematically analyse exhibition content in detail, and instead mostly aimed to draw broader conclusions that reflect the relationship between state and museum. This thesis has thus contributed to the IR, museum studies and China studies fields because it has analysed museum narratives in detail to gain an in-depth understanding of the story communicated to foreign visitors, and because it considered the possible international soft power effects of the discussed exhibitions in their new digital format and context.

6.1 On narratives

In chapter four, the story that is presented to foreign visitors in the virtual exhibitions on the CCP's rise to power from the National Museum of China, the Military Museum, and the Nanjing Memorial Hall was analysed in detail. This story was found to describe how and why the Communist Party defeated the Japanese occupiers and the KMT to argue in favour of the CCP's continued leadership.

This story consists of four main narratives, the first of which is the suffering of the Chinese people under Japanese and KMT rule before their 'liberation' by the CCP. This narrative is mostly communicated through gruesome imagery depicting executions and mass murders. These photographs confront visitors with the suffering of the Chinese without a need

for further written explanation. They also encourage visitors to sympathise with and support the attempts by the CCP to end the Japanese occupation and to defeat the KMT. The second narrative, which centres on communicating the bravery and strength of the CCP's troops during the fights that ensued, similarly encourages visitors to appreciate the CCP. With the gruesome images of the peoples' suffering still in their minds, visitors encounter constant references to the challenging environments and warzones the troops endured, for instance through lifelike dioramas. This narrative of heroism can result in admiration or support for the CCP and its soldiers because of its emphasis on their determination to fight and suffer for the wellbeing of the people. The third narrative further encourages these sentiments by highlighting the good deeds enacted by the CCP during and after the Civil War period. The references to the CCP putting war criminals to trial whilst simultaneously showing mercy and providing care to many Japanese after the war, help paint a picture of the CCP as a humanitarian party advocating for justice. The final narrative describes how the entire country supported the rise to power of the CCP. It does so by detailing how the people of China, no matter their ethnicity, were finally able to unite because of the CCP; first alongside the Party in the fight against the Japanese and the KMT, and then in their support for the Party. The CCP is thus given legitimacy through references to the Party's past efforts to 'liberate' the people from the terrors performed by foreign powers and the KMT, and also through the description of its popular support that culminated in the creation of a nation. To sum up, the story of China's modern history, as presented in the three analysed virtual exhibitions to foreign visitors, is one that continuously argues in favour of the CCP's leadership.

This story is, according to findings of scholars researching domestic narratives, extremely similar to the story presented to Chinese citizens, both within and outside of museums. Following China studies and IR scholars' general consensus, arguments in favour of the Party's legitimacy as well as attempts to create a national identity based on the CCP consistently come forward in narratives on China's modern history within Chinese media, education and museums.[130] The thing that connects China's diverse population and what national pride, history and culture is based on consequently *becomes* the CCP.[131] This resonates with this thesis' findings, for example in the final narrative that the virtual exhibitions were

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[130] See for example:
Varutti, *Museums in China,* 2;

Zhang and Courty, "The China Museum Boom," 31.

[131] Denton, *Exhibiting the Past,* 3.

found to communicate to their foreign visitors. This narrative is centred on arguing that it was only after the CCP came to power that "great national unity" was achieved. This thesis' findings therefore not only confirm what IR and China studies scholars such as Weatherly, Zhang and Shelach-Lavi have previously found when researching memory narratives on the CCP in the domestic context, but they also show that the same memory narratives are applied in an international one.[132]

These similarities can be explained. In general, scholars consider the CCP's legitimacy to be dependent on these very narratives on modern history. The idea that the Party has provided guidance and protection to the Chinese people ever since its founding is argued to provide the CCP and its policies with domestic support and trust.[133] If these narratives were to suddenly shift or slightly change depending on target audience, a discontinuity would be created that could cause or increase Chinese citizens' scepticism regarding the stories they are familiar with.

The similarities between China's domestic and international history narratives do not stop here; all English texts within the three analysed exhibitions are direct translations of Chinese texts that accompany them.[134] This means that any differences in familiarity with the presented history between domestic and foreign audiences have not been accommodated for in the translations, and that, whenever a text was translated, no word or information alterations were made based on target audience or desired effects. Perhaps this can be linked to translation issues, such as the unwillingness to translate or lower levels of English language skills, which according to translation scholars are relevant in the Chinese museum context.[135] These issues can result in there being no observable distinctions, beyond translation mistakes or awkward sentence structures, as texts are translated word for word. It could also indicate that the exhibitions' curators assume that the narratives communicated to Chinese speakers are convincing and comprehensible to all visitors. Or, perhaps, the curators might not be interested

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[132] Weatherly, and Zhang, *History and Nationalist Legitimacy in Contemporary China,* 2-3;

Shelach-Lavi, "Archeaology and Politics in China," 38-39.

[133] Xiaoling Zhang, Melissa Shani Brown, and David O'Brien, "'No CCP, No New China': Pastoral Power in Official Narratives in China," *The China Quarterly* 235, no.1 (2018): 784.

[134] Not every Chinese text has been translated by the exhibitions' curators. This is discussed in detail in chapter 5.

[135] See for example:
Robert Neather, "Translation in a 'Non-Translation' Community: Practices, Ideologies, and Conceptualisations of Translation in the PRC Museum Discourse Community," Translation Quarterly, no. 51 & 52 (2009): 169;

Zhongli Yu, and Thomas Hirzel, "Museum Text translation in the Chinese Context: the Museum Role and Text Production," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 19, no.1 (2022): 11.

in or do not prioritise influencing foreign visitors' perceptions of China's Communist history, and therefore do not care for altering texts to accommodate or discredit diverging opinions and knowledge on the presented history.

6.2 On possible soft power effects

Chapter five discussed the virtual exhibitions' communication of their narratives to foreign visitors by analysing their affordances and designs. It did so in order to discuss the exhibitions' soft power potential. The virtual exhibitions' communication with foreign visitors was found to be flawed to such an extent that the story discussed above does not successfully reach this audience in its entirety, and that the exhibitions' soft power potential is thus very limited.

The main problem that the virtual exhibitions face in their communication is that their affordances do not enable visitors to clearly observe, read or interact with the exhibitions' storytelling tools. One major obstacle is the limited amount of positions from where visitors are made to observe the exhibitions' content. This, combined with the exhibitions' low resolutions, makes it so that visitors cannot see some objects, images or texts clearly or sometimes even at all. As a result, large pieces of information, and therefore of the story, are lost. Missing information is a recurrent issue in the exhibitions' communication with foreign visitors. It also occurs because of the lack of accessible information to non-Chinese speakers in the exhibitions, and through a lack of necessary context that foreign audiences might require in order to understand the story on display, for example because of their unfamiliarity with Chinese modern history. These three issues combined do not only make the story unclear and superficial due to missing details or background information, they can also lead to frustration among foreign visitors. These visitors might feel neglected by the lack of accessible and clear information, or even feel annoyed with the difficulties of moving around in or engaging with the exhibitions. Because these virtual exhibitions' communication relies entirely on visitors' continued willingness to explore the exhibitions' content, frustration is detrimental to their possible soft power effects. Finally, the lack of international promotion of these virtual exhibitions further diminishes their soft power potential. The exhibitions probably enjoy very little international engagement as people are not made aware of their existence. It is thus unlikely that they manage to reach a broad audience. Any soft power effects will consequently be limited.

Virtual exhibitions are a relatively new phenomenon, meaning that museums are still exploring how to best communicate through them. As discussed in this thesis' literature review, the challenges of virtual exhibitions, for instance in terms of missing authenticity due to the digital and thus mediated experiences of online visits, are currently explored and discussed in academia. Scholars tend to argue in favour of applying entirely new approaches to communication, ones that do not align with traditional communication strategies, in order to circumvent these challenges.[136] The three exhibitions analysed in this thesis do not do this. Instead, they are very object-centric and thus apply traditional communication strategies. As shown in chapter five, this traditional way of communicating with visitors online is indeed unsuccessful in this thesis' case studies, thus confirming the arguments made by museum studies scholars.[137] The simplistic designs, that mimic a traditional exhibition's, make the online experience boring; the only difference between a physical and virtual visit is experiencing the space through a screen which, as Schweibenz explains, generally has negative effects.[138] An artificial and distant experience is created, one that fails to evoke any excitement. Furthermore, because of the analysed exhibitions' affordances, the virtual visitor is occasionally obstructed from engaging with this traditional design. Because of these two factors, it seems as though the virtual experience has not truly been considered by the exhibition curators - the exhibitions feel rushed and unfinished, and at no point is the virtual visitor enticed to continue their visit. It is thus clear that new approaches to communication in virtual exhibitions, ones that stray from traditional museum approaches, would indeed be beneficial to create enjoyable experiences. At the very least, if virtual exhibitions do apply traditional approaches, the exhibitions' affordances should enable visitors to fully engage with these traditional story-telling tools, so that annoyances and this unfinished feel to the exhibitions can be avoided.

To conclude, it is important to note that the narratives that the virtual exhibitions communicate must also be convincing and strong in order to have any soft power effects on foreign visitors. This thesis' case studies do seemingly consider this. The Military Museum and the Nanjing Memorial Hall only mention their close ties to the Party on their Chinese websites.

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[136] See for example:
Wolf, Reinhardt, and Funk, "Virtual Exhibitions," 85;

Bowen, "The Virtual Museum," 4.

[137] See for example:
Álvarez, Portús, and Vives, "Del Zoo Victoriano al Ecosistema Electrónico," 144;

Kim, "Virtual Exhibitions and Communication Factors," 253.

[138] Schweibenz, "Museums Exhibitions – The Real and the Virtual Ones," 42.

Non-Chinese speakers are therefore not made aware of the influence of the CCP on the museums and, consequently, on the stories they present. Furthermore, internationally controversial figures, such as Mao Zedong, and other topics that can lead to diverging opinions, such as references to Communist ideals, barely come forward in the communication to non-Chinese speakers within the exhibitions. For example, the Civil War is never framed from an ideological perspective to this audience. Instead, the CCP's efforts are made to centre on 'liberating China' from aggressive figures and groups, rather than on establishing a Communist state. The narrative therefore becomes one of liberation, which might be familiar to foreign visitors as multiple countries around the world were fighting independence wars during the same years. Although this liberation narrative is also prevalent in the story communicated to Chinese speakers, references to the 'wrongs' of capitalism and capitalist societies are only included in texts that remain untranslated. Communist ideals are thus more present in the sections of the exhibition that are inaccessible to those who do not speak Chinese. Additionally, throughout all three exhibitions, Mao Zedong's name is only mentioned five times in English. His name does, however, appear many times in texts that have not been translated. The labels underneath the few photographs of him are also often unreadable due to the exhibitions' low resolutions or because they are only written in Chinese. Mao, who is not only inherently linked to Communism but is also often associated with the deaths of millions, is thus mostly missing from the story presented to foreign visitors despite his important role in the presented history as the leader of the Red Army and the CCP. It is up for debate whether or not this has been done intentionally by the exhibitions' curators, but the effect of it is that possible controversial elements are mostly excluded from the narratives presented to foreign visitors. This potentially makes the exhibitions more convincing and powerful in their communication with foreigners. However, the biased and patriotic language that continuously comes forward within the exhibitions' translated texts will undoubtedly be noticed by sceptics, which can decrease the believability of the story on display and thus directly limit its soft power effects.

6.3 Concluding thoughts

This thesis's findings raise a number of questions. The Chinese government is perceived by both China studies and IR scholars alike as being very concerned with its and China's international image, which would explain why the CCP engages in multiple global soft power

strategies.[139] Furthermore, scholars generally agree that the CCP is highly aware and makes active use of the power of museums to convey and promote narratives.[140] However, this thesis' findings do not align with these consensuses. Soft power aims to attract, rather than coerce, people into agreeing with or doing something you want.[141] This means that a country's culture or history must be made attractive, for instance by speaking directly to what is familiar to, relevant and interesting for the target audience, in order to have effects. However, this thesis found that the three analysed virtual exhibitions present the same narratives to foreigners that are presented to Chinese citizens, meaning that no efforts have been made to purposefully attract foreigners by, for example, altering the narratives to match their pre-existing ideas, knowledge or familiarity. Additionally, the affordances and designs of the virtual exhibitions hinder communication with foreigners to such an extent that this potential soft power tool fails to entice and successfully inform these visitors. Does this mean that the CCP is neglecting this soft power tool? Is the Party, unlike what scholars have argued in the past, unaware of the soft power potential of museums or, perhaps, of virtual exhibitions specifically? Or is the CCP not as interested in convincing foreigners of its legitimacy as scholars expected or believed it to be? Future research projects could investigate how involved the CCP has truly been in the development and promotion of Chinese museums' virtual exhibitions, how and why certain design choices were made by the virtual exhibitions' curators, and whether or not there are any observable differences in affordances and designs between virtual exhibitions that are only accessible to Chinese speakers and those that are also accessible to people who do not. These potential projects could indicate to what extent the CCP and Chinese museums are interested in gaining soft power through virtual exhibitions. But for now, this thesis' findings beg for some nuance in academia's understanding of the CCP's 'hunger' for and far-reaching determinism to gain international soft power. Scholars' current perception of the CCP's reliance on and continuous return to museums for this soft power should similarly be reconsidered, at least when it is applied in an international context.

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[139] See for example:
Lai, "China's Cultural Diplomacy," 85;

Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

[140] See for example:
Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*;

Zhang, and Coutry, "The China Museum Boom," 31.

[141] Nye, *Soft Power,* 1.

This research was one of the first to analyse virtual exhibition content. This proved to be very insightful - not only to understand that what is communicated, but also to detect where communication issues in this developing medium arise. When observing that what is communicated, flaws and challenges within virtual exhibitions' communication with online audiences become clear. Not only gaps in the story or vagueness, but also user unfriendly affordances that obstruct this communication have become apparent during this research because of its discourse analysis. Methods like this can therefore pinpoint exactly where and why communication issues arise. These findings can in turn be used to improve or develop new designs for virtual exhibitions. Future research projects on virtual exhibitions would thus benefit from similarly combining discussions on content and affordances and design.

It is important to note that methodologies on how to best study that what is communicated through virtual exhibitions are yet to be established. Though the methodological approach applied in this thesis is applicable to its case studies because they follow traditional communication strategies, new approaches should be developed for exhibitions that provide entirely different online museum experiences, such as the interactive or immersive ones that scholars argue in favour of. Future projects should therefore not only explore what these experiences should or could look like, but also what effects they will have on narrative and research.

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Appendix: Categorisation of images in the virtual exhibitions

	"The Road to Rejuvenation"	*"The CCP-led Revolutions"*	*"The Three Victories"*
War effort imagery	**67**	**473**	**209**
Soldiers	51	369	153
Generals	8	33	34
Warzones	6	57	17
Production of uniforms and/or weapons	2	14	5
Gruesome imagery	**12**	**21**	**46**
Wounded people	4	10	5
Deceased people	7	7	28
Starving people	1	1	1
Executions	0	3	11
Prisoners	0	0	4
Important figures[142]	**118**	**254**	**276**
Portraits	69	190	162
Group photos	30	29	56
Meetings/conferences	19	35	61
Object-focused imagery	**39**	**227**	**238**
Weapons	1	12	18
Military vehicles	4	12	37
Documents	3	95	79
Maps	2	25	6
Written slogans[143]	0	21	10
Buildings/monuments[144]	29	58	52
Propaganda posters	0	4	36
Landscapes[145]	**7**	**65**	**9**

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[142] Images that give off the impression that the depicted people play an important role in the presented history. For example because their portraits have received a dedicated space in the exhibition. As international visitors are often unable to read the provided informative labels due to the low resolutions of the exhibitions and/or the labels being in Chinese, they are often left to guess what the true roles of the depicted people in history were.

[143] For example graffiti and banners.

[144] Some images of buildings and landscapes are used as wallpapers on which objects, paintings and pictures are hung. These images serve to help create a better understanding of where and under what circumstances certain historic events took place.

[145] See footnote 144.

Political rallies	**15**	**31**	**74**
Tribunals[146]	**0**	**4**	**70**
Everyday life	**7**	**18**	**6**
Images with unclear context[147]	**6**	**19**	**30**
Total	**271**	**1.111**	**958**

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[146] All tribunal images are related to the prosecution of Japanese or German soldiers, war criminals and political figures from during and leading up to the Second World War.

[147] Due to the low quality of the exhibitions and/or the fact that the informative labels next to these photographs were unreadable, it was unclear what was depicted on these photographs.