

**“Riben Guizi”:
Evolutional History of Chinese Fourteen-year War Memory**

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VR259 Memory: A New Approach to China's 20th Century History

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Introduction

The Fourteen-year War¹ is long over, but the memory of the war never dies. Upon the ravages rises new buildings day by day, but the scars in people's hearts may need a longer time to heal. Resentful of their wartime atrocities, Chinese people have given the Japanese soldiers a household nickname – “Riben Guizi”[日本鬼子], meaning “Japanese devils” and sometimes just mentioned as “Guizi” for short.² Today, this derogatory term, tinged with xenophobia and nationalism, is still widely used in informal situations, not only denoting the Japanese invaders but also referring to the ordinary Japanese. From the perspective of memory study, the phrase “Riben Guizi” is a true reflection of the negative emotions on the Fourteen-year War among the Chinese people, thus having a great research value. While existing studies mainly focused on the image of “Riben Guizi” in early literary and artistic works,³⁴⁵⁶⁷ this paper further expatiates on the use of “Riben Guizi” across various media with big data tools and thereby explore the evolutionary history of Chinese memory on the Fourteen-year War.

¹ War of Resistance against Japan between 1931 and 1945.

² In general, “Guizi”, i.e. “devils”, is a contemptuous term for all foreign invaders (e.g., “Yang Guizi” means “foreign devils”), but it has been most commonly used on Japanese people since the Fourteen-year War.

³ Guohong Lei, “Memory of Mirror Image - Japan ‘Devil’ Image in 50, 1960s Literature,” *Journal of Baoji University of Arts and Sciences (Social Sciences)* 31 (2011): 83-87.

⁴ Guohong Lei, “The Other Image in Self View – the ‘Guizi’ Image in Contemporary Chinese Literature,” 2012.

⁵ Xiaolin Yang, “Putting Salt over the Non - Healing Wound of the Nation,” *Journal of Nanning Junior Teachers' College* 19 (2002): 38-41.

⁶ Tingting Hu, “Overview of the Image of ‘Devil’ in ‘Seventeen Years’ Movies,” *Journal of Changchun Normal University* 36 (2017): 195-97.

⁷ Qingshuang Li, “On the Image of Japanese Devils in Chinese Anti-Japanese War Literature,” *Educational Science (Quoted Version)* 8 (2017): 280-81.

Image of “Riben Guizi,” the Cause, and the Impact

The image of “Riben Guizi” comes into Chinese people’s memory through three major ways. First, for the few who have personally gone through the war, they may have a direct impression on the Japanese invaders, which varies according to their own experiences. The second way is the oral account – from the witnesses to the onlookers, from the elderly to the youngsters, the tellers are likely to give embellishment to the stories and stress the evilness of the Japanese ethos. The third approach, and probably the most profound one after the war, is the “anti-Japanese-themed” works such as songs, popular literature, and TV series. Especially in early creations, “Riben Guizi” usually appears with an ugly, savage, and stupid image. The soldiers are short and ill-looking, killing innocent people without hesitation; they may be crafty sometimes, but eventually, they will get beaten like a drowned rat by the heroic Chinese army. The Japanese officers on TV always grow a characteristic mustache – Rendan Hu; they act rude to the subordinates when the latter made mistakes, and they often speak a mixed language of Chinese and Japanese. Some of these peculiarities did root in historical facts, but in general, the fictional works tend to overly demonize the Japanese to cater to the emotion of the audience.

Besides the resentful emotion, the stereotyped image of “Riben Guizi” is easily accepted for several other reasons. Firstly, the Japanese army did commit numerous atrocities in China during the Fourteen-year War (e.g., the Nanjing Massacre); the historical foundation makes the concept fairly convincing. Secondly, from the view of imagology, “the tendency to attribute specific characteristics or even characters to different societies, races or ‘nations’ is very old and very widespread.”⁸ Namely, the prevalence of “Riben Guizi,” an over-simplification of “others,” corresponds to a common historical phenomenon. Thirdly, the Chinese nation was eager for a

⁸ Joep Leerssen, *Imagology: History and method* (Leiden: Brill | Rodopi, 2007): 17.

sense of self-identity during the postwar period; people wished to build a strong self-image by uglifying their enemies, and “Riben Guizi” naturally became a perfect target. Lastly, the Japanese right-wing forces have been on the rise time and again during the recent decades, accumulating tension among the Chinese population and thus sustaining this image of Japanese.

During the war period, calling the Japanese “Riben Guizi” could be regarded as a patriotic act, as it reflected the determination to drive the enemy off. When the war ended, however, this appellation has gradually become a carrier of ethnic hatred, hindering the normalization of the Sino-Japanese relations. Even worse, there exists a tendency to map the ugly image of the Japanese invaders on the whole Japanese ethnic group, which results in serious prejudice and discrimination. Luckily, we see that “Riben Guizi” has been occurring with much less frequency today among the young generation of China, as is analyzed in the following parts.

Usage of “Riben Guizi” in *People’s Daily*

People’s Daily, the official newspaper of the CCP central committee, is one of the most authoritative and influential media in mainland China. With the tool of BLCU Corpus Center⁹ (BCC), today we can easily perform some statistical analysis on the usage of “Riben Guizi” in *People’s Daily* from 1946 to 2015.

The search results show that the phrase appeared the most frequently right after the PRC was founded, especially during the Korean War – “Riben Guizi” was mentioned 215 times in 1950 and 266 times in 1951. By contrast, this number never exceeds twenty after 1972, the year when China and Japan established diplomatic relations, except in 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the victory in the Fourteen-year War, when “Riben Guizi” was mentioned forty-three times. After 2008, the word only occurred ten times in total.

⁹ Endong Xun et al., “The construction of the BCC Corpus in the age of Big Data,” *Corpus Linguistics* 3 (2016): 93-109.

Furthermore, we may study the “relative frequency” of “Riben Guizi” with respect to the neutral appellation of the Japanese army – “Ri Jun”[日军]. Specifically, it is defined as the ratio between the occurrence number of “Riben Guizi” and the total count of “Riben Guizi” and “Ri Jun.” As is shown in Figure 1, the “relative frequency” drops dramatically in the year 1978, when China embarked on the journey of reform and opening-up.

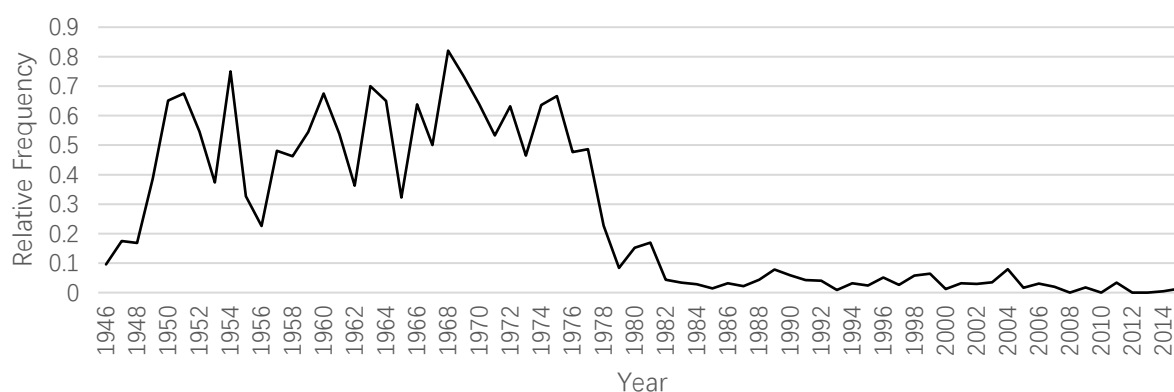


Figure 1. Relative frequency of "Riben Guizi" in *China's Daily*

Most articles that include “Riben Guizi” are memoirs and historical stories. Generally speaking, the early pieces appear to be more militant, and the phrase is frequently mentioned together with the other enemies of the PRC, such as Chiang Kai-shek, the landlords, and the “American imperialism.” By comparison, the later works are, more often than not, just the recalling of the miserable past, sometimes with the purpose of reflecting the happiness in the new society. To conclude, *China's Daily*, as a representative of the official media, is leading the trend to treat the Fourteen-year War more rationally and objectively.

Usage of “Riben Guizi” in Non-official Media

Apart from *China's Daily*, the BCC corpus also includes numerous literary works (masterpieces of both Chinese and foreign writers), scientific journals, and microblog moments. Table 1 lists the frequency of “Riben Guizi” in these media, as well as its “relative frequency” against “Ri Jun.”

Table 1. Frequency and relative frequency of “Riben Guizi” in different media

	<i>People's Daily</i>	Literature	Scientific	Weibo ¹⁰
Count per billion characters	1345	2921	180	257
Relative frequency	0.127	0.507	0.034	0.211

It is clear that scientific journals, as a representative of rationalism, tend to avoid this spiteful appellation. On the other hand, emotionality seems to be a sufficient reason for the extensive use of “Riben Guizi” in literature. However, the theory does not explain the low frequencies of the phrase in Weibo, whose content is no less emotional than the works of the litterateurs. Presumably, this phenomenon implies that the new generation of China is using the phrase less frequently than their seniors.

Nevertheless, “Riben Guizi” is still a common expression in Chinese everyday language. What’s worse, it is sometimes used to refer to the common Japanese people. In a random sample of one hundred Weibo moments that contain “Riben Guizi,” thirty-one are of this case. Some are due to personal conflicts; for example, before a football match between Guangzhou Evergrande FC and Kashiwa Reysol FC, a Weibo user wrote, “Come on, Evergrande! Beat the ‘Riben Guizi’!”¹¹ But more of them seem to be out of nowhere; for instance, a joke starts with, “Some ‘Riben Guizi’ came to our company the other day...”¹² Another common usage is to satirize the current in virtue of the image of “Riben Guizi”, which takes up twenty-two out of the one hundred records; e.g., “My mom said that every time I go back home, I eat up all the food as if

¹⁰ Weibo is an open microblog platform that advocates “share what you want to say,” similar to Twitter.

¹¹ Liang Jun Ma, comment on Weibo, <https://weibo.com/1087572477/AaTSg7ZvU>

¹² Weibo Ju Haowan, comment on Weibo, <https://weibo.com/2815926483/Aok6D1MiR>

‘Riben Guizi’ entered the city.’¹³ In the sample, only nineteen are discussing the real history of the Fourteen-year war, while the rest employ “Riben Guizi” as some abstractions. Interestingly, about five percent of the total 582 records are about encountering “Riben Guizi” in the dream.

Conclusion

In conclusion, “Riben Guizi,” tied with a strong negative image of the Japanese invaders, has been an important component of the Chinese Fourteen-year War memory. Its prevalence can be attributed to multi-factors, such as the historical foundation, the impact of “anti-Japanese-themed” works, the radical public mood in the early years, and the unstable international environment. Meanwhile, the phrase has involved from a simple alternative name of the Japanese invaders to a token of more complex concepts – sometimes as a carrier of national hatred. Thanks to China’s friendly neighboring diplomacy and the reform-and-opening policy, this discriminative appellation has appeared less frequently in recent years, whether in official or non-official media, which in turn reflects the improvement of the Sino-Japanese relationship.

¹³ _Rain__bow, comment on Weibo, <https://weibo.com/2691986073/Aahth7xCR>

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