Title:
Seeking the Chinese Knight-Errant: Vernacular Exemplarism, Veteran Activism, and War Commemoration in Contemporary China

Abstract:
The majority of current scholarship frames the identifier "veteran" as a political and socioeconomical identity. While useful, the existing framework and terminology fails to capture the dynamic process in which veteranhood is manifested in particular cultural paradigms and moral values. To fill this intellectual gap, this article provides an anthropological account of a historical redress movement that sought to aid a group of forgotten Chinese veterans. Beginning in the 1990s, local activists started a grassroots movement that aimed to restore the glory of veterans who fought in the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945). Due to changing political allegiances in post-1949 communist China, these ex-service personnel were stigmatised in political movements and have lived in abject poverty. Drawing upon an 18-month fieldwork conducted in 2015 and 2018, this ethnographic study closely examines how local communities select and represent a particular group of veterans to venerate. It describes the process by which veterans are celebrated as heroes of the Chinese nation and imbued with moral privilege. To construct the moral privilege of these veterans, war memories are entangled with aspects of Chinese traditional morality in a process that I term as *vernacular exemplarism*. This new form of morality takes inspiration from the cultural imagination of martial-art heroes, portraying the forgotten veterans as Chinese knights-errant who embody traditional righteousness. Using participant observation, in-depth interviews, and content analysis, this study reveals how moralised veteranhood is constructed through charitable caregiving and commemorative rituals conducted by the activists on behalf of the veterans. It concludes with a methodological reflection on how to conceptualise the role of morality in shaping war memories and the civil-military relationship.

Biography:
Jacqueline Zhenru LIN is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge, and a member of St John's College. Her doctoral thesis, entitled *The Digital Life of Goodness: National Heroes, NGOs, and Commercialized Charity in China* (submitted in September 2020), sheds light on a historical-redress movement aiming at re-evaluating the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945) in contemporary China. Foregrounding the institutional production and social networking among different stakeholders, her ethnographic study interrogates a new modality of doing good as featured in digital China: e-commercialised charity. Through an anthropological lens, her work examines the relationships between memory and heroism, civic engagement and volunteerism, charity and activism.