

'The century of humiliation' and the politics of memory in China

Lihe Wang looks at how selective national memories play a part in the construction of Chinese identity in the context of increasingly nationalistic politics in the country.

In early February 2020, a *Wall Street Journal (WSJ)* op-ed article discussing the coronavirus caused a massive backlash on Chinese social media. Two weeks later, three *WSJ* reporters were expelled from China by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as punishment (Shepard & Manson 2020). For a newspaper that is blocked in mainland China, the amount of attention generated by this single article was astonishing. The reason lay in its title: 'China is the Real Sick Man of Asia'. This title seems rather innocuous at first glance, considering that similar phrases have been used multiple times to describe weak states in the West. While some may accuse the editor of insensitivity for applying such a phrase to describe a global pandemic with immediate human consequences, the real reason for the massive outcry lies behind its unique historical significance. The phrase 'sick man of Asia' first emerged in the Chinese context to describe the century of humiliation, one of the darkest chapters in China's history (Yau 2020). This was a period of internal fragmentation and external subjugation, followed by a series of unequal treaties that were forcefully imposed upon China.

While the century of humiliation officially ended with the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, it has entrenched a deep sense of indignity and victimisation into the Chinese national identity. Indeed, this understanding has guided many to argue that dignity and humiliation are the main drivers of Chinese foreign policy (Garver 1992; Nathan & Ross 1997). However, this perspective fails to explain why this period became so salient in Chinese historical memory. For a 'civilisation of 5000 years', one might think cultural focus would be on brighter periods of Chinese history. There is no denying the atrocities that China suffered during the century of humiliation, but as a country that is already a great power in many aspects, why does its national identity remain so scarred by a deep sense of victimhood and insecurity? The answer may lie in the broader trend of selective politicisation of public historical memories, used to bolster regime legitimacy and accommodate changing foreign policy needs. Instead of treating historical legacies as verifiable absolutes, this article problematises them and focuses the analysis on how collective historical memories are selectively fashioned by the Party to solve present preoccupations (Halbwachs 1992).

Victimisation as a tool for legitimisation:

State history propaganda designed to increase regime legitimacy plays a big part in the lasting presence of the powerful victimised national identity. This is clearly demonstrated in the 'Patriotic Education Campaign' of the early 1990s (Zhao 1998, 288). As a response to the crisis of 'belief in the party' following the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, the campaign saw a change in the focus of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) official historiography (Liao 2013). Previously, the official historical narrative had been that of a 'victor narrative' focused on Maoist class struggle (Wang 2008). The campaign marked a shift to that of a 'victimisation narrative' that instead focused on China's suffering due to the actions of the West and Japan, and, more importantly, how the CCP led the country out of these adversities to achieve independence (Wang 2008). By emphasising its indispensable role in protecting the country from foreign aggression, the CCP managed to reclaim its competency and moral legitimacy as the single ruling party (Liao 2013). The victimisation narrative was taken further by adding a xenophobic tone through 'China Dream' discourse cultivated in the campaign and formalised in 2012 (Callahan 2015). This discourse relied heavily on the dream of 'national rejuvenation', as opposed to

the Hu era discourse of China's 'peaceful rise' (Zheng 2005; Xi 2013). When the premise of 'rejuvenation' is returning China to its former greatness before the century of humiliation, the sources of humiliation – the West and Japan – are thus rendered impediments that must be overcome.

'There is no force that can shake the foundation of this great nation... No force can stop the Chinese people and the Chinese nation forging ahead' - Xi Jinping at the reception in celebration of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC (CCTV Video News Agency 2019).

In this sense, the China Dream discourse is not merely a positive expression, but one that promotes a civilised Chinese identity through the contrast of constructed barbaric Western and Japanese identities (Callahan 2015). Alternative portrayals of history, such as the films *Devils on the Doorstep* by Jiang Wen, and Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution*, that fail to conform to the dominant narrative of a victimised nation fighting to redeem itself from foreign domination are heavily censored and condemned (Edwards 2016, 74). Therefore, when the CCP stakes its legitimacy on wiping out past humiliations, its success is achieved at the expense of reinforcing victimisation in the first place.

Historical memories as a foreign policy instrument:

Not only are historical memories selectively represented to increase domestic regime legitimacy, they are also used in foreign policy to accommodate various strategic objectives. First, this is reflected in a sense of righteousness and moral authority. During the 2019 Hong Kong protests, China's ambassador Liu Xiaoming accused the UK of a 'colonial mind-set' when then UK foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt called on China to honour its commitment of 'one country, two systems' and understand the root cause of the protests (Smith 2019). Similarly, memories of a 'China carved up by imperialist powers' are frequently invoked to defend an absolutist notion of sovereignty and territorial integrity (people.cn 2016; Xinhuanet 2019; people.cn 2019). China's repeated demand that Japan should hold a 'correct view' of history and apologise for its aggressions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been used as leverage in Sino-Japanese relations (Suzuki 2007). Similarly, the history of imperial China is reconstructed as that of a benevolent hegemon to advance the peaceful rise agenda (Zhao 2013). However, this argument largely ignores China's history of expansion, leading some to question whether the history of the tributary system can be completely rewritten when studied from the perspectives of China's neighbours (Yu 2014).

The CCP's official historiography is adapted to suit the different foreign policy objectives arising from the fast-changing international environment. For example, in Sino-Japanese relations, there were several times where memories of humiliation were intentionally downplayed. In early February 2020, Japan's coronavirus donations won massive praises amongst the Chinese public. As a show of good will, twenty episodes of a popular television series, *Red Sorghum*, were taken off air because they would have painted Japan in a negative light (Radio Free Asia 2020). Similarly, when China was seeking to restore economic and diplomatic relations with Japan in the early 1970s, Japanese wartime atrocities were downplayed and demands for war reparations were renounced (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1972). A further example is the CCP's changing official historiography of the Kuomintang (KMT), whose contributions to World War Two (WWII) were largely ignored under Mao (Weatherley & Zhang 2017, 120). This first changed in the 1980s, marked by the posthumous recognition of KMT generals Zhang Zhizhong and Li Zongren (Weatherley & Zhang 2017, 120).

The second change took place in the early 2000s, when Hu Jintao met with Lian Zhan, the then leader of the KMT, and subsequently recognised the contributions of the KMT in the war against Japan (Hu 2005). An important reason for both moves was to improve relations and eventually achieve unification with Taiwan. This is especially clear in the second instance, which was part of a broader campaign by the CCP to engage with the pan-Blue camp in Taiwan to isolate the pro-independence Chen-Shuibian administration. These efforts seem to suggest the Party's awareness of the pressure of growing nationalist sentiments, which would in turn bind the Party's hands in foreign policies, trapping it in a tight balance between looking weak to the domestic audience and acting overly provocative overseas.

Alternative perspectives:

As Zha Jianying once said, 'China is way too big a cow for anyone to tackle in full' (Zha 2011, 8). In studying China, one should always keep in mind the diversity and fluidity of such a vast country. As a person can have multiple identities, so can a country (Shambaugh 2011, 9). On the one hand, there are already positive signs that the CCP leadership is actively moving China away from the victimised identity towards one that is more inward-looking, benign, and confident. On climate change, China had traditionally viewed itself as a 'victim of the ecological imperialism', resisting emission-reduction commitments and arguing firmly for the principles of equity and sovereignty (Zhang & Orbie 2019). This is in contrast with the increasingly flexible approach it has adopted in recent years, where China have begun to embrace the role of a 'torchbearer of the global climate change regime' (Zhang & Orbie 2019). While this was partly fostered through changing domestic and economic landscapes, the move reflects the leadership's aspirations to improve China's international image as a 'responsible great power' and sends a strong signal of its willingness to shoulder more responsibilities in global governance. On the other hand, the official discourse of Chinese identity often reinforces Han Chinese identity at the cost of ethnic minority identities, like the Tibetans and Uyghurs. The binaries of modernity and backwardness that China suffered due to the West are now transferred onto an internal hierarchy of civilisation and barbarism (Tobin 2019, 743). Under this historical materialist perspective, ethnic minorities are framed as passively dependent on the majority Han; their backwardness can only be overcome through economic progress and cultural homogeneity under the guidance of Han (Tobin 2019).

Despite the CCP's iron grip on all things 'politically sensitive', national identity is not the product of elite manipulation alone. For example, the contending functionalist perspective views national identities as essential for economic development, whereas the culturalist perspective places a greater focus on causes such as the shared roots of ancestry and cultural origins (Tang & Darr 2012). Additionally, it is worth acknowledging that the selective representation and interpretation of history and physical reality is not a strategy employed only by the CCP. For example, some have discussed the China threat theory, which is often used to justify the United States' (US) 'Pivot to Asia' policy, constructed based not on material forces but on ideational ones that threaten the equally constructed American identity of freedom and democracy (Pan 2004; Turner 2013). In this sense, as China and the US continue to view each other through the lens of 'otherness', their national identities will become increasingly mutually constitutive. Similarly, the Shinzo Abe administration has been accused of whitewashing the Empire of Japan's war crimes during WWII to stoke nationalist fervours (Onishi, 2007; Fackler, 2014). Therefore, acknowledging the propaganda behind the memories of humiliations is not to condone the acts of the aggressors, but rather to encourage all countries to reflect on their approach to historical education and understand their actions through each other's eyes.

Conclusion:

The foundation of the dominant Chinese identity lies not in history itself, but instead in the selective representation and reconstruction of historical memories as a mobilisation tool. The victimised identity remains relevant today because it was chosen to be, in order to bolster the CCP's legitimacy and justify China's narrative of a peaceful rise. Is it likely to remain relevant? Some evidence points against optimism. First, under Xi, efforts have been made to increase the omnipresence of state propaganda, particularly in the education system and the cyberspace (Luqiu 2020; Cook & Truong 2019). Second, under the current climate of strategic competition, many western democracies, not least the US, are becoming increasingly wary of China's growing influence (Smith and Taussig, 2019; Zakaria, 2020). Policies that seek to deny the great power status that China feels it rightly deserves, such as technological decoupling and the US Pivot to Asia policy, run the risk of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Not only will they reinforce the existing victimised Chinese identity which relies on the existence of an American 'other' determined to sabotage China's development, they also risk forcing China into adopting a similarly provocative foreign policy which could in turn reinforce US perception of the China threat theory. Nonetheless, how the contestation between the top-down, victimised and xenophobic identity, and the bottom-up, confident and benign identity, will turn out remains to be seen, as the CCP does not have a monopoly on historical memories and must fight hard against alternative Chinese identities emerging from other sources.

This article has been edited by Alex Hymer (East Asia & Pacific Editor) & Abigail Adams (Chief Regional Editor), peer reviewed by Mingqi Liu and Samantha Kichmann (Chief Peer Reviewer), copy edited by Grace-Frances Doyle, Veronica Greer, Harriet Steele and Ben Malcomson (Chief Copy Editor), checked and approved by the following executives: Robert Jacek Włodarski (Editor-in-Chief) and Emily Hall (Deputy Editor-in-Chief), and produced by James Hanton (Chief of Production).

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