

***Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations.*** By Zheng Wang. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. Pp. 312. \$ 32.50 / £ 22.50 cloth.

Written from an insider's perspective, this book reveals the deep culture of Chinese domestic politics and foreign relations. How did the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) survive the post-Tiananmen Square legitimacy crisis and then regain popular support in the 1990s? Economic prosperity is part of the answer. The other half of the answer lies in the interpretation of historical memory. Wang poses two questions: first, how have the Chinese Communist leaders used history and memory to reshape national identity so as to strengthen their legitimacy for ruling after the end of the Cold War? Second, how has this reconstruction of identity influenced China's political transformation and international behaviour (14)? He hypothesises that 'by reemphasizing and reopening China's chosen trauma, Beijing was able to make a successful transition from a bankrupt communist ideology to one of nationalism based on historical memory' (223). Historical memory has been effectively used by the CCP to sustain domestic power and generate foreign relations rhetoric since the Jiang Zemin administration's promotion of the elite-led, top-down Patriotic Education Campaign in 1991.

The historical memory of national humiliation refers to the period of foreign invasions and lost wars from the First Anglo-Chinese War (aka the First Opium War, 1839-42) to the Second Sino-Japanese War, 1937-45 (3, 7-8, 48). Wang believes these elements in China's historical narrative are chosen traumas.<sup>1</sup> He probes the idea of historical memory by asking: 'Whose memory is this?' 'Is it the CCP's memory or the people's memory?' 'How true and reliable is that memory?' 'How valid is it to assert that the national humiliation of the past will never return if China is strong enough to protect itself (238)?' China's overreliance on historical memory of national humiliation is like taking a palliative: temporary solutions do not guarantee eradication of the problem. The manipulation of historical memory desensitises people from looking for a real solution to political complications. It promotes a sense of insecurity and paranoia. It opens the floor for people to draw endless parallels between current events in Chinese international relations and China's 'semi-colonial' past. Without a satisfactory answer to 'a century of humiliation' puzzle, China can never sincerely embrace the post-Westphalian global norms, rules and institutions. It can never be a truly responsible stakeholder in global affairs and a confident member of the international society. Wang argues China has transformed from the 'victor narrative' in the Mao era to the 'victimization narrative' after 1991; from a class-based view of history and glorious internationalism to a CCP-internalised nationalism. After the implementation of 'I am the victim' policy, China has lost its old moral charisma—which celebrated proletarian victory and heroism—among some developing states and leftist activists around the world.

This book convincingly contextualises and systematises a social science discussion on collective emotion. Its major contribution lies in the application of Johan Galtung's Chosenness-Myths-Trauma (CMT) complex. The production of a national mental illness accompanies the ossified *tianxia* system and the mandate of heaven,<sup>2</sup> which has been central to the legitimacy issue, nation-building process and collective memories of national humiliation in

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<sup>1</sup> The narrative can be summarised in three four-character phrases: 'repeatedly fought and lost' (*lǚ zhàn lǚ bài*), 'to cede territory and pay indemnities' (*gě dì pèi kuǎn*) and 'to surrender sovereign rights and bring humiliation to the country' (*sàng quán rù guó*) (48).

<sup>2</sup> '*Tianxia*' is a geopolitical and psychocultural concept related to Chinese universalism (in contrast with the nation-state and world system). In the Chinese language, China is called '*Zhongguo*,' which means 'The Middle Kingdom.' Ancient Chinese people believed '*Zhongguo*' is the centre of the whole world. The Chinese worldview was expressed as '*tianxia*,' which means 'the realm under heaven' or 'all-under-heaven.' '*Zhongguo*' is in the middle of '*tianxia*.' Whoever controls '*Zhongguo*' would have 'the mandate of heaven' (legitimacy given by transcendental power) to rule over '*tianxia*' (42, 71-75).

China. The oppression of civil awareness produces fuzzy thinking patterns and reinforces 'Chinese culturalism' and 'Chinese universalism' (72). Cultural superiority, Sinocentric assimilation, intergroup discrimination and the 'arrogance-self-pity' syndrome are deep seated parts of the Chinese collective unconscious. Most Chinese people are not able to and/or do not dare to question these constructions of nationalism.

Wang's work prompts us to re-examine Chinese nationalism from the perspective of historical (in)justice and political apology. One feasible approach is to apply Elazar Barkan's 'historical dialogue': Scholarly 'truth' carries weight in society. '[Historians] can employ their scholarship—in this case rigorous and collaborative historical projects aimed at fostering dialogue—in a way that enables them to act as advocates in the cause of reconciliation' (Barkan 900). Such peacebuilding method echoes with the 'joint problem-solving approach' mentioned in Wang's book (210). China should face its historical truth; while its former aggressors should consider apology and reparation. *The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action* (2001) and the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council draft resolution on 'Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Forms of Intolerance, Follow-up to and Implementation of *The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action*' (2008) urge old colonial powers to 'issue formal apologies to the victims of past and historic injustices and to take all necessary measures to achieve healing and reconciliation'.

China could pursue reconciliatory initiatives and solve the long-standing 'problem' of national humiliation by using these international legal instruments; but in reality, China is neither actively asking Western governments to apologise and pay reparation nor forgetting its difficult past. Why? Is there any reason for China to deliberately leave its problem unsolved? How does the CCP choose what to remember and what to forget? Since the implementation of the Patriotic Education Campaign in 1991, the Chinese Government has selectively used historical memory to construct a 'sense of victimization'. The knowledge produced—that is, the shared historical narrative of national humiliation—is internalised by individuals. It guides the behaviour of the Chinese population. This leads to more efficient forms of social control, as knowledge enables individuals to govern themselves. The result is exactly what the CCP wanted: populist nationalism has sustained the Party's legitimacy of rule. That is why the problem of national humiliation has to exist.

At the end of the book, Wang expresses a feasible worry that '[without] liberation from the powerful complex of historical myths and trauma, a multiparty democracy could lead China into a dangerous development, because history and memory issues can be easily used by nationalist leaders as tools for mobilization or in generating conflicts between the new democratic China and its old enemies (241)'. The violence 'gene' in Leninist communism adds fuel to a populist, radical nationalism. The use of historical memory of national humiliation in post-Mao China has potential danger that we may not be aware of.

*Never Forget National Humiliation* should definitely be discussed by readers who are interested in China Studies, historical (in)justice and political apology, and general International Relations. As a gesture of self-examination for the 'Middle Kingdom syndrome' and the CMT complex, this book (particularly Chapter 2 and 3) is a great read. It is a unique resource for citizen education aimed at a healthy transformation in the master narratives of Chinese history.

#### References:

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