
National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism

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The line separating good from evil passes not through states, nor
between political parties—but right through every human heart.
—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Use the past to serve the present.
—Mao Zedong

While I was researching the South China Sea disputes between China, Vietnam, and the Philippines, I came upon an unlikely reference. In an otherwise hard-nosed analysis of the issue, a noted Chinese expert cited a book called the *Atlas of Shame*. This odd juxtaposition of security studies, territoriality, and emotion piqued my interest, and I asked a friend in Beijing to track down this curious book. Once I got a copy of the *Atlas of the Century of National Humiliation in Modern China*, the correct title, I was fascinated by what seemed to be a unique feature of Communist Chinese historiography and identity: the very deliberate celebration of a national insecurity.

But the more I looked for national humiliation discourse, the more I found. Though they do not receive much attention in Western analysis, it turns out that there are textbooks, novels, museums, songs, and parks devoted to commemorating national humiliation in China. I continued looking for examples of such national insecurity in other countries. I found that such activities are not limited to some exotic political culture of “the East.” Humiliation is a common and recurring theme in domestic and international politics, being invoked far and wide in a diverse set of circumstances. Humiliation has thus joined guilt, victimhood, and apology as a

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topic of analytical interest in international studies.¹ With the spread of popular media and the growth of public opinion, such individual feelings have been nationalized: the Guilt of Nations.² But this popular politics has not necessarily led to greater democracy or freedom. Rather, it has added another dimension to the broad forms of governance that rely on culture and history for political and economic projects. Indeed, this nationalization of shame has accompanied a denationalization of industry and a liberalization of markets around the globe.

This article examines how humiliation has been an integral part of the construction of Chinese nationalism. Public culture is analyzed to show how national humiliation is not deployed just in a predictably xenophobic way but also in a self-critical examination of Chineseness. By contrast, in her article following this one, Marie Thorsten³ criticizes the standard U.S. understanding of Japanese economic success as a parody.⁴ Though the Japanese state does periodically issue national images, they are not part of a narrative about postwar vengeance, about the humiliation of the vanquished or an economic Pearl Harbor. We find quite the opposite: Japan's postwar consumer identity has not been directed from the top down, through a rational state bureaucracy in a way imagined by others, particularly in the United States, as warlike nationalism.

On the face of it, Thorsten and I disagree about the political import of shame and humiliation. On the one hand, Thorsten uses the topic of "shame" to understand something else: how the United States mis/understands Japanese economic success. On the other hand, I use Chinese nationalism to argue that the logic of humiliation itself needs to be probed. While Thorsten analyzes an international discourse of intercultural understanding and norms, I focus on a group of nationalist texts that is largely unknown outside China. Both of us examine how humiliation is used by political leaders and public culture to mobilize populations, but these populations are on opposite sides of the dispute: I consider nativistic understandings of the Chinese self, while Thorsten examines a U.S. othering of Japan. While I argue that humiliation can be generalized to explain a modular form of nationalism, Thorsten examines the Japanese case as a peculiarity of U.S. identity politics. Indeed, while the global media use shame to motivate the United States to intervene in places like Bosnia, in China it is just such intervention—that is, foreign invasion—that is commemorated as national humiliation.

The complexity suggested by the two articles demonstrates the multicode nature of the word *shame*. To have shame is both a virtue and a problem along the lines of the tension between having

humility and humiliation.⁵ More to the point, both Thorsten and I agree that understanding humiliation is more complex than a simple calculation of links between defeat, humiliation, and revenge. Humiliation thus is reframed from an irrational emotion that needs to be cured, through (social) psychology, to a social practice that needs to be understood in terms of political and historical narratives.

Though the articles come to different conclusions about shame politics, both share a general methodological approach: They appeal to narrative theory and textual analysis to explore the complex politics of identity and history. The articles also appeal to social theory to conduct a nuanced examination of the consequences for both domestic and international politics of the deployment of shame and humiliation. Indeed, shame politics provide an interesting example of how the self not only constructs the other as enemy, but how the other constructs the self in complex ways. Still, we need to question the politics of humiliation, asking if it is yet another category that the West uses to orientalize the other as irrational and thus illegitimate. This is a particularly important issue since the two articles offered here both come from East Asia. Yet as Thorsten's article points out, shame discourse does not dominate Japanese images; shame is a product of Western understandings of Japan. Neither article comes to any hard and fast conclusion about a politics of shame, but together they seek to show how shame reshapes problems, and thus solutions, so as to encourage a more nuanced analysis of the politics of humiliation.

Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism

Nationalism in China has been a growing concern for the post-Cold War world. The end of the Cold War affected different countries in different ways. Though the crisis of Communism did not deconstruct China as it dissolved the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, understandings and self-understandings of the People's Republic of China (PRC) have shifted from Communism to nationalism. On the one hand, Marxism-Leninism has been on the wane in China since the mid-1980s as a result of Deng Xiaoping's economic "reform and opening" policy. The state thus was in search of a unifying ideology: patriotic nationalism. On the other hand, some academics and policymakers in the West shifted from seeing China as a Communist menace to a nationalist problem: the China threat. Recent studies of Chinese foreign policy, in both Chinese and English, often link this "new nationalism" with the rise of China. Unfortunately, much of the discussion of Chinese nationalism has a

very narrow, top-down view of identity and politics, typically re-defining nationalism first as official nationalism, then as statism.

To understand nationalism and national security, this article will argue that it is necessary to understand national insecurities.⁶ In other words, Chinese nationalism is not just about celebrating the glories of Chinese civilization; it also commemorates China's weakness. This negative image comes out most directly in the discourse of China's Century of National Humiliation (*Bainian guochi*). Chinese books on the topic generally tell the tale of China going from being at the center of the world to being the Sick Man of Asia after the Opium War (1840), only to rise again with the Communist Revolution (1949). To understand how Chinese nationalism works, we need to reverse Paul Kennedy's famous thesis about "the rise and fall of the great powers" to examine the "fall and rise" of China: Many of the titles of these books include the phrase "from humiliation to glory."⁷ The discourse of national humiliation shows how China's insecurities are not just material, a matter of catching up to the West militarily and economically, but symbolic. Indeed, one of the goals of Chinese foreign policy has been to "cleanse National Humiliation."

Representations of the 2001 U.S. spy-plane collision over the South China Sea are a case in point. To Beijing, it was much more than simple violation of Chinese sovereignty: It was seen as a moral problem, another in a long line of humiliations that China has suffered since the Opium War. Resolving this problem did not involve military retaliation or economic reparation so much as symbolic recognition: China demanded a public apology from the United States. Recalling the "Vietnam Syndrome," conservative U.S. commentators told President Bush that any apology would be a "profound national humiliation."⁸ A few weeks later, the National People's Congress in Beijing declared a new national holiday, National Humiliation Day, as part of a "National Defense Education Law." Though Washington and Beijing were very much on opposite sides of this dispute, the way each framed the issue revealed striking commonalities. International politics has been transformed from "conquer or be conquered" into "humiliate or be humiliated." Mainstream commentators, thus, have declared that history is a "strategic issue," especially as it informs the dynamic between nationalism and foreign policy.⁹

Chinese nationalism is a huge field of inquiry. To gain purchase on this vast topic, it is helpful to take an oblique view of Chinese identity through an examination of the specialized field of "national humiliation" texts. Humiliation may still seem like an odd place to look for nationalism: Humiliation is something that

you suffer, rather than promote. But as we will see, in China and other countries, humiliation is not just about passive “victimization.”¹⁰ National humiliation discourse involves a very active notion of history and recovery. As the ancient work *Liji* (Book of rites) tells us: “The humiliation of a thing is sufficient to stimulate it; the humiliation of a country is sufficient to rejuvenate it.” From 1927 to 1940, in Republican China there was an official holiday called National Humiliation Day. But national humiliation is far from simply being an obscure historical curiosity. It provides the context for the founding moment of the PRC, when Mao Zedong told the world in 1949 that the Chinese people had finally stood up: “Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation. We have stood up.”¹¹ In other words, the narrative of national salvation depends upon national humiliation; the narrative of national security depends upon national insecurity.

Not only Mao makes such pronouncements: Other countries’ key texts likewise link national salvation with national humiliation. During the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln declared April 30, 1863, to be the “day of national humiliation” in order to encourage “the restoration of our now divided and suffering country, to its former happy condition of unity and peace.” In a similar vein, Gandhi declared a “National Humiliation Day” of mass demonstrations in April 1919 to inspire the Indian nation to fight against British imperialism. Mao’s speech recorded how China had overcome the humiliations of both civil war and imperialism to found the PRC.

Still, humiliation is characteristically seen as part of irrational mass politics, and national humiliation is considered an example of either (1) a determinist notion of primordial national history that naturally defines eternal enemies, or (2) a political culture that is manipulated by elites in power politics.¹² Causal links are then drawn between defeat, humiliation, and revenge.¹³ Those who posit a “China threat” thus argue that China will naturally avenge its humiliation via expansion. The weakness of this approach is that it tends to build up static and deterministic notions of history and identity that easily fall into orientalist stereotypes.

Rather than searching for the true history to determine natural enemies and allies, this article starts from an appreciation of the “fundamental indeterminacy of relations between self and other.”¹⁴ Humiliation thus is one of the modes used to draw ethical boundaries between self and other, between domestic and foreign. But these distinctions are never clear: With humiliation it is often the self that is “othered.” As Shakespeare famously wrote, “this sceptred isle . . . that was wont to conquer others, hath made a

shameful conquest of itself.”¹⁵ Foreign relations, thus, go beyond official government policy to include the intersubjective relations of self and other, domestic and foreign.¹⁶

Remarkably, this vibrant genre of historiography in China has only recently attracted critical analysis.¹⁷ An examination of how the modern narrative of national humiliation is written can show how domestic and foreign factors continually define each other in China, just as national humiliation shapes national salvation.

The Century of National Humiliation: The Hegemonic Discourse

National humiliation unproblematically dots texts (in both Chinese and English) about Chinese identity and politics. It is taken for granted that the meaning is clear: The Chinese “nation” was “humiliated” by foreign aggression and domestic corruption. It would not be an exaggeration to argue that the master narrative of modern Chinese history is the discourse of the century of national humiliation.

The PRC’s very deliberate appeal to national humiliation in state education policy¹⁸ can tell us much about how historical memory informs both domestic and international politics. Chinese textbooks characteristically mention the century of national humiliation to define modern Chinese history and to celebrate the foundation of the PRC in 1949. The discourse recounts how at the hands of foreign invaders and corrupt Chinese regimes, sovereignty was lost, territory was dismembered, and the Chinese people were thus humiliated. The Opium War, whereby the British navy pried open the Chinese empire to Western capitalism, is usually seen as the beginning of the century of national humiliation. This tale is characteristically written according to diplomatic historiography—a linear narrative that records the various invasions, wars, occupations, lootings, and unequal treaties that China suffered at the hands of imperialism.¹⁹ As a key national humiliation textbook puts it: “Never forget national humiliation. . . . The invasion of the imperialist powers and the domestic reactionary ruling class’s corrupt stupidity together created the roots of this catastrophe.”²⁰

The table of contents of *A Record of National Humiliation*, a slick picturebook, gives a good idea of the nature of the discourse:²¹

1. The beginning of national humiliation and the forfeit sovereignty: the First Opium War
2. The new expedition of the descendants of pirates: the Second Opium War

3. A disgrace beyond redemption: Franco-British forces burn Yuanming Garden palace
4. Nation conquered, country smashed: the Sino-Japanese War (1894)
5. Ghosts of the Black River: the massacres of Hailanpao and the sixty-four villages of Jiangdong [in Manchuria by the Russians]
6. Deep humiliation of the Boxer Uprising: allied forces from eight powers invade China
7. There are no national boundaries here: the Russo-Japanese War (1905)
8. A heavy burden to bear: the humiliation of the missionary courts
9. Dirge of the Songhua River: the events of September 18 [1931: Japanese invasion]
10. Reign of terror in the golden tomb: the Massacre of Nanjing [1937]

The above chronological table of contents shows the peculiarities of the historiography of national humiliation. Like other such texts, it is missing the key event of the nineteenth century: the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864), which has been called “the most destructive civil war in the history of the world (at least in terms of lives lost)” and was “the most serious threat to the survival of the last imperial dynasty in China.”²² That pivotal event is not included in such books because it does not fit in with the moral narrative of national humiliation: foreign imperialism encouraged by domestic corruption. Hence, this chronology of key events guides our understanding of threats and solutions in particular ways. Starting at the turn of the twentieth century with the Sino-Japanese War, the main enemy shifted from Western imperialism to Japanese imperialism. After a series of Japanese invasions, the final atrocity is the “Rape of Nanjing,” where invading Japanese troops systematically massacred the civilian population of China’s capital city. The century of national humiliation ends with the national salvation of China in 1949 when Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) finally put “China” back together again.

The long-term aims of the national-humiliation narrative are both political and cultural, foreign and domestic: (1) to “cleanse national humiliation” the Chinese government first needs to overcome imperialism by uniting these lost territories under Beijing’s leadership; (2) the CCP needs to prove that it is better than previous “stupidly corrupt” regimes by achieving social and economic development. Again, “national salvation” is the discursive twin of “national humiliation.” National-salvation discourse can inspire

economic reforms, but it can also encourage a military reconquest of China's "sacred territory." During World War II, a patriotic banner pictured a heroic Chinese soldier holding up a decapitated Japanese head as a trophy; it reads: "To wipe out our humiliation with our enemy's blood." On the other hand, in 1997 President Jiang Zemin told the Fifteenth Party Conference that living a "relatively comfortable life" also serves to cleanse national humiliation.²³ Living well is the best revenge.

The national-humiliation narrative is painstakingly reproduced in textbooks, museums, popular history books, virtual exhibits, feature films, dictionaries, journals, atlases, pictorials, and commemorative stamps. It has its own set of specialized vocabulary, iconic images, and idioms. The discourse of the century of national humiliation is treated as natural: There is very little ironic or critical commentary on it in China.

Comparative Humiliation?

The "Century of National Humiliation" is the official view of modern Chinese history in the PRC. But it is more. The discourse is not just "the standard view of Chinese Communist historiography," a "Marxist-Leninist mind-trap," or "stale Maoist ideology," as many scholars assume.²⁴ It is a recurring theme in both pre-1949 Republican writings and post-1949 Taiwanese discourse as well. Humiliation is a key part of modern Chinese subjectivity.

Two issues dog a consideration of national humiliation: the narrowness of "culturalism," on the one hand, and the banality of universals, on the other. The above summary gives a sense of how Chinese people feel that they are unique in national humiliation. Only China could go from so high a civilization to be the lowest of the low, the Sick Man of Asia, and back again. The atrocities visited upon China are seen to be horrific beyond comparison: We are told that the Rape of Nanjing was worse than the Holocaust. But as the above quotes from other countries show, the discourse of national humiliation is invoked far and wide. Ireland, rather than having merely one century of national humiliation is in its ninth century of shame, and the issue is still unresolved; Serbians tell us that they have been suffering for more than six hundred years, and in Korea national humiliation is used not to describe ancient history but the current economic crisis: "Today's agreement [with the IMF] will open up a new door for the South Korean economy to enter into a new era. To many South Koreans, the agreement was 'National Humiliation Day.'"²⁵

While the quotations suggest that national humiliation is not unique to China, they also demonstrate how the discourse is not

universal either. It is largely deployed in specific circumstances as part of a nation-building project (anti-imperialist revolution) or a nation-repairing (civil war) project: An impending civil war is the context of Shakespeare's *Richard II*; Lincoln speaks during the Civil War; the South Korean foreign minister mourns the passing of economic sovereignty to the neocolonial IMF; Gandhi is leading an anti-imperial nationalist movement. As noted above, Mao is celebrating the victory over both imperialist and civil war humiliations. In classical Chinese texts, "humiliation" is commonly deployed in the building and guarding of social boundaries: male/female, proper/improper, inside/outside.²⁶ Whereas before the twentieth century humiliation marked the boundary between civilization and barbarism, it is not surprising that the modern discourse is involved in building and guarding national borders.

National humiliation then is not a bland universal, a Dickensian paradox of "the worst of times, the best of times." Nor is there a humiliation-to-vengeance calculus that predictably accompanies defeats. It describes a modular form of nationalism, a specific historical narrative that produces nation-states out of empire and civil war.²⁷ What is curious about this specific narrative is that it involves complex self/other relations. National humiliation joins all Chinese in a performance that is both critical and self-critical. China needs to not only "other" Japan and the West, but "other" itself by way of a thorough self-criticism: National humiliation is necessary for national salvation. As Solzhenitsyn wrote, "The line separating good from evil passes not through states nor between political parties—but right through every human heart."

In other words, we need to understand how humiliation comes not just from "foreign invasion" but also is the result of "domestic corruption." Because China was never completely conquered, post-colonial criticism is not merely of the British, Japanese, or U.S. colonizers, but of the Chinese political culture that allowed such atrocities to happen—again and again. A character in the cult novel *Trainspotting* describes an analogous situation for modern Scotland: "Ah don't hate the English. They're just wankers. We are colonized by wankers. We can't even pick a decent vibrant, healthy culture to be colonized by. No. We're ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin low, the scum of the earth."²⁸ Because in China the colonialism was not territorial so much as ideological, criticism characteristically involves even more robust self-criticism, described by some as "self-loathing."²⁹ Chinese critics vent their anger not just at foreigners but at Chinese leaders for being weak in the face of foreign provocation.

To understand how humiliation works in Chinese public culture, we will not go to the familiar sister discipline of social psychology.

Rather, following the cultural turn in international-relations theory, aesthetic theory will be used to explain the issues. Wu Hung, for example, looks to the ruins of the Yuanming Garden palace to make more general points about Chinese society. This is an excellent example since the palace, which Wu describes as “the first and most important modern ruin in China,” is also *the* iconic image of the official history of the century of national humiliation.

The Yuanming Garden palace, now a park at the Northwestern edge of Beijing, is commonly described as the most fabulous royal garden in the world. It was destroyed in 1860 as part of the Second Opium War, which saw the British and French armies loot Beijing. In contrast with the West, which has had a cult of ruins for centuries, before the mid-nineteenth century there was a taboo on preserving or portraying ruins in China. But when Europeans started photographing Chinese ruins, Chinese artists and the general public took notice.³⁰ This resulted in the creation of a Chinese “ruin culture.” Rather than referring to a lost past, in China “these images, as modern memory sites, evoked the calamities that had befallen the Chinese nation.”³¹ Thus in China ruins are not merely artistic but are part of a nationalist aesthetic where “the emergence of a modern Chinese conception of ruins, that architectural remains surviving from the war or other human calamities were ‘living proof’ of the ‘dark ages’ caused by foreign invasion, internal turmoil, political repression, or any destruction of massive, historic proportions.”³²

Ruins, as such, do not simply refer to the past. They are neither nostalgia nor testimony to the inevitability of the decay of both the grand and the banal. Rather, they testify to foreign invasion and domestic corruption: the twin themes of national humiliation. As the catalog of the Museum of Chinese Revolutionary History—one of the key sites of the discourse of national humiliation—tells us, “the CCP lead the whole country and the masses of all the nationalities from the *ruins* of war to stand up.”³³ National-humiliation discourse certainly is propaganda, but it is more: It has a large and sympathetic audience in the PRC. The phrase “Never Forget National Humiliation” is repeatedly inscribed in the comment book at the end of the museum’s permanent exhibit.

The Yuanming Garden palace represents national humiliation in the sense that it is more than another example of a shameful historical atrocity. Images of these ruins work as icons in the pictorial representation of the discourse: Pictures of the destroyed garden grace book covers, pictorials, commercial brands, posters, calendars and T-shirts. Since it was reconstructed in the 1980s, the Yuanming Garden palace itself is a theme park for a grand day out. In

this way, “the Yuanming Yuan [is] a symbol shared by the people and the state,”³⁴ a “nationalist souvenir,” both in the sense of a remembrance and a leisure commodity.

The ruins thus evoke not just national humiliation and national salvation, but modernity more generally: “What made them ‘modern’ . . . was their emphasis on the present, their fascination with destruction and violence, their embodiment of a critical gaze, and their mass circulation.”³⁵ For modernity needs ruins; for a nation, we need humiliation. From the fragments of the ruins, the humiliation, we can “reconstruct the lost totality,” not just in poetry or visual culture,³⁶ but in national salvation. Here humiliation/salvation is a thoroughly modernist movement—appealing to the master narratives of modernization and nationalism—rather than the fragmentation of the postmodern. Actually, fragmentation constitutes one of the few political crimes left in China; the worst epithet is not *capitalist* or *counterrevolutionary*, but *splittist*. This charge is leveled against those who give a critical view of Chinese desires for reunification with Taiwan or of China’s occupation of Tibet and Xinjiang.

Alternative Histories, Alternative Humiliations

National humiliation is one of the few discourses that transcended the Communist/nationalist ideological divide to describe modern Chinese subjectivity more generally. Mao’s nemesis, Chiang Kai-shek, discusses it at length in *China’s Destiny*.³⁷ In the Nationalist Party version, the key villain is no longer Britain or Japan, but Russia. Here, national humiliation starts with the seventeenth-century Russian expansion into the “Far East”: “Before Russia invaded Siberia, China was truly without national humiliation.”³⁸ The Russian humiliation of China culminated with the founding of the PRC in 1949; the 1950 Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty is seen as yet another unequal treaty evidencing continued Russian imperialism.³⁹ This is seen as a horrible step backward because Chiang Kai-shek claimed to have ended the century of national humiliation in 1943 when he renegotiated the unequal treaties.⁴⁰ Likewise, while Beijing sees the PRC’s joining the United Nations in 1971 as “cleansing of national humiliation,” Taipei saw it as another horrible humiliation: “Since October 1971 when it entered the UN, the fake Communist bandit government has troubled the world and humiliated our nation.”⁴¹ Indeed, the political context of Liu Zhen’s “history of national humiliation” and a republication program of national-humiliation texts from the early twentieth century

is clear: Taiwanese discussion of national humiliation reappeared in the 1970s just as the Republic of China faced its most serious crisis of sovereignty and identity.

Time: Centuries and Days of National Humiliation

The discourse of national humiliation in China has a history, too: though the dates of the century are 1840 to either 1949 or 1943, the phrase was first popularized in 1915—seventy-five years into what later would be called “the century.” Indeed, the addition of the word *century* to “national humiliation” shows the narrativity of the discourse. Even though the endpoint is contested—1949 for Communist revolution; 1943 for nationalist diplomacy—national humiliation had to have an endpoint to take on its official moral valence in the narrative of the fall and rise of the Chinese nation.

Before it was conceptualized as a grand century, national humiliation was experienced according to a more tactile and repetitive notion of time: a series of days commemorating national humiliation. The discourse took shape in 1915 to oppose Japan’s “Twenty-one Demands,” which seriously compromised Chinese sovereignty. The hostile reaction to Japan’s demands was not so much official as popular. Certainly, there was talk of China being humiliated before 1915, but the discourse of national humiliation in an organized form dates from 1915. There were patriotic mass movements to commemorate the popular opposition to the Japanese demands: rallies, boycotts, “societies of national humiliation,” and activities by overseas Chinese merchants and students. There was not just a “national salvation fund”—which was to be expected—but also a “national humiliation fund.”⁴²

When the Chinese government acquiesced to Japanese demands in 1915, attention shifted to how to mark the national humiliation. The phrase “Never Forget National Humiliation” was popularized in newspapers; it was “a slogan painted on walls, coined into trademarks, and imprinted on stationery.”⁴³ This was again done through popular education: school textbooks, “spiritual education,” youth reading groups, songs, and plays. Creating a “national humiliation day” is not just a twenty-first-century phenomenon. It was celebrated unofficially after 1915 and would later become an official holiday under the Nationalist regime. In 1915, there was much political discussion about on which day the humiliation should be commemorated: May 7, when Japan made the Twenty-one Demands, or May 9, when the Chinese president accepted them. Criticize self or criticize other? This debate was never settled, showing the tension between criticism and self-criticism that national humiliation entails.⁴⁴

A similar discussion occurred in 2001. The PRC's National People's Congress agreed to establish National Humiliation Day, but could not agree on a date. Curiously, neither May 9 nor May 7 was mentioned in the debate. Dates proposed include July 7 (the Japanese invasion of 1937) and September 7 (the Boxer Indemnity of 1900). Politically, the choice is between a very clear vision of the (Japanese) enemy and a very diffuse sign of foreign aggression.⁴⁵

The rise of the humiliation discourse in 1915 was not by chance. The transition from empire to nation-state in China had only just begun with the republican revolution in 1911. The first challenge to the Republic of China came just three-and-a-half years later, with the Twenty-one Demands. The Japanese empire presented a credible threat to territorial integrity and civilizational security; by 1910, it had swallowed Korea whole, and contemporary debate raged about how to avoid the "Korean option." Opposition to Japan knit together the various classes and regions of China: It was the first challenge to China as a modern nation-state. These activities were part of a dynamic where the construction of the Chinese nation-state is intimately related with its opposite—empire: first, the Qing dynasty; then, the imperial designs of Western powers and Japan. Chinese sovereignty can be asserted only after it has been humiliated. The temporal discourse reinforces the notion of the nation-state as both the Century and the Day served to join "national" to "humiliation."

Space: Irredentism in Greater China

The discourse of national humiliation is unstable, not just temporally, but spatially. In addition to the atlases of national humiliation, the histories and pictorials typically have a map of a "China' before humiliation" as frontispiece. These maps show how the imperialists did not just "carve up" China, but dismembered the Qing empire. In the early twentieth century, authors of diplomatic histories of national humiliation mourned not only the loss of "Our Hong Kong" but also of "Our Burma," "Our Siam [Thailand]," and "Our Annam [Vietnam]."⁴⁶ Indeed, one of the icons of national-humiliation discourse is a map of China from 1898 showing the imperialist powers "carving the country up like a melon."⁴⁷ A century later (1999), the cover of a hypernationalist text displayed a similar map with the caption that it "exposed the long-term Western conspiracy to divide up China."⁴⁸

Starting in the 1990s, the national-humiliation theme was used in greater China to reinforce claims on islands (e.g., Hong Kong and the Spratlys) as "naturally Chinese." Since China lost face by

losing territory to Western powers and Japan before 1945, now it must make sure not to lose face again by losing territory to its Southeast Asian neighbors. As one book argues: “The history of the century of humiliation of the Chinese race continually tells us: foreign races invade us via the sea. Experience repeatedly reminds us: gunboats emerge from the Pacific Ocean; the motherland is not yet completely unified; the struggle over sovereignty of the Spratlys, Diaoyutai and the Sino-Indian boundary still continues. . . . We must build a strong navy to guard territorial integrity, and to protect national maritime rights and privileges.”⁴⁹

Such texts follow the militarized notion of cleansing national humiliation. The lost “sacred territory” must be reclaimed and reunified. But as many of the maps refer back to the territories of the Qing dynasty at its peak, it is fair to ask, “What is the status quo ante that China is seeking to recover in cleansing its national humiliation: equality or empire?” China here risks reproducing the discourse of imperial superiority/humiliation once again: humiliating neighboring states by demanding (tributary) submission as the Qing dynasty did before the century of national humiliation.

As with temporality, maps put a certain spin on national humiliation discourse. More than simply highlighting the territoriality of both humiliation and nationalism, these maps serve to naturalize a sacred link between people and territory.

Critical Humiliation

Unofficial views in Hong Kong and Taiwan contest the notion of humiliation altogether. As the 1997 handover graphically showed, Hong Kong is written into Chinese national history as a sign of humiliation; at the ceremony, Jiang Zemin declared that “the occupation of Hong Kong was the epitome of the humiliation China suffered in modern history.” Yet some Hong Kong people write a counterhistory for a distinct Hong Kong identity. They state that Hong Kong is not a badge of humiliation: “We truly do not have to bear the cross of National Humiliation created by an earlier generation. In fact, historically, neither the Nationalist Party nor the Communist regime had ever discharged its obligation to the Hong Kong people.”⁵⁰ Likewise, Taiwan survived its crisis of sovereignty in the 1970s (mentioned above) in part because identity politics moved beyond the national humiliation/national salvation dynamic to a more plural notion of Chineseness. Alternative histories do not just produce alternative humiliations but also alternative nationalisms.

Back in the PRC, critical scholarly commentary on national humiliation discourse is in its nascent stages.⁵¹ Certain events, like the 1988 *River Elegy* TV series, aroused controversy but had little lasting impact. Critical evaluation is just starting in literature. Wang Shuo's novels are a case in point. In *Please Don't Call Me Human*, Wang directly addresses the discourse of national humiliation, replaying many of the official themes and vocabulary in a farcical style.⁵² The humiliation here does not concern unequal treaties or invasion, but sport: China is trying to recover from losing to a Western wrestler.⁵³ To cleanse this humiliation, a group of promoters form a committee to search for a Big Dream Boxer to revive the martial-arts style of the 1900 Boxer Uprising. But when the committee finds a 111-year-old Boxer, he is arrested. In the interrogation, officials see that history is not as heroic as they had hoped. The veteran declares, in the spirit of the Scot in *Trainspotting*, "The Great Qing was doomed, so what difference did it make who finished it off? Better to hand it over to a friendly nation than to the local slaves. Take a look at Hong Kong, then Macao. Are those people enslaved?"⁵⁴ After such outbursts that questioned the official history of national humiliation, the regime recast this "hero" as a traitorous scapegoat who was "incontestably responsible for the crushing of the glorious Boxer Rebellion," as well as a host of other crimes.⁵⁵ Back in the main plot, the committee chooses the veteran's son, Yuanbao, to be its Big Dream Boxer. But the training regime actually remolds Yuanbao again and again, from a pedicab driver to a martial artist, from a nativist Chinese to a Westernized man to an intellectual to a TV actor to a ballet dancer and a soldier. But before Yuanbao can fight him, the Western wrestler suddenly dies: "FAT MAN LEARNED OF PLANS TO PIT HIM AGAINST A BILLION HOSTILE PEOPLE STOP . . . THIS MORNING COMMITTED SUICIDE . . . NATIONAL HUMILIATION CLEANSED STOP HALLELUJAH STOP."⁵⁶

But since the committee created Yuanbao as a "commercial venture to beat the foreigners and make money,"⁵⁷ they can't stop here. Like in the official national-humiliation discourse, this farcical version sees cleansing in two areas. Though they have cleansed the humiliation of foreign sports victories, now they need to address socioeconomic development, which is transformed from national prosperity into their own scam. The committee decides that new opportunities can be found in women's sports. Thus they reeducate Yuanbao once again to train him in femininity before a sex-change operation. In the end, she wins an "Olympic" medal for China for "humiliation" in the International endurance competition by ripping off her own face. The one thing that Chinese excel at, Wang tells us, is enduring national humiliation: Castration was

not enough; China also needed to lose face on the international stage. Rather than, in modernist style, showing ruins and humiliation pointing toward a unified Chineseness, Wang's novel points to a postmodern "fragmentation of the past as well as the present."⁵⁸ But this criticism, though entertaining, is limited. It tends to reproduce national humiliation, albeit via farcical inversion and hyperbole.

To cleanse national humiliation, others say that China needs to move beyond national salvation. Though the CCP still claims the mission of national salvation, cleansing national humiliation also involves the simple pleasures of a more "comfortable lifestyle" for the Chinese people. A few scholars in China are starting to voice similar ideas: It is time for China to stop being a victim and become more of a "normal" country. Some novelists, too, are moving in this direction. When asked why he was more creative in exile than was Solzhenitsyn, Gao Xingjian, the Chinese Nobel laureate, replied: "He wanted to save Russia. I only wanted to save myself. It will be more practical to live only in the current moment."⁵⁹ A character in *Please Don't Call Me Human* puts it well: "National Salvation? Which Nation? Salvation from what? Our nation's doing just fine, thank you, and getting better."⁶⁰

Conclusion

National humiliation is a common and recurring theme in Chinese public culture. The discourse takes many forms: public histories, textbooks, museums, mass movements, romance novels, popular songs, prose poems, feature films, national holidays, and atlases. All these are part of a modernist narrative in its most basic sense of a linear progressive history that prescribes the unity and homogeneity of the nation-state. In the PRC, national-humiliation discourse is produced in the last refuge of one of the major institutions of modernity, the Chinese Communist Party; but it is important to note that its Central Propaganda Department is now concerned with promoting *nationalist* history.

National humiliation seems to be a purely domestic discourse, but its notions of "the rightful place of China on the world stage" continually inform Chinese foreign policy in both elite and popular discussions. Though national humiliation is considered in Western discussions of Chinese foreign policy, it is mentioned only in passing, usually as evidence of a problem of Chinese victimization that needs to be overcome for China to be a responsible member of international society. Chinese sources, on the other hand, stress how the outside world, particularly the prosperous West, needs to understand China's particular suffering.

Both these approaches to the discourse take its coherence for granted. Yet the shifting temporality and spatiality of these multiple modernist narratives also shows the instability of both *national* and *humiliation*. As Wang writes: “Which Nation? Salvation from what?” National humiliation is not something peculiar to China. Nor is it a bland universalism that draws causal links: Military defeat leads to national humiliation, which leads to vengeance. Rather it is a transnational model that takes particular forms, but largely within the limits of nationalist discourse as it has developed in the context of anti-imperialist revolution and civil war since the nineteenth century. In this way, humiliation is intertwined not just with modern China but with modernity.

Still, what is curious about this discourse is that it goes beyond the expected heroic themes to stress a humiliating history that is critical and self-critical of Chineseness. The distinction between self and other is not clear, but always shifting. The “*Rashomon* effect” is not simply perspectivism; as the final lines of *Rashomon* tell us, “No, I am the one who’s ashamed. I do not understand myself.”⁶¹ Having a sense of shame (to recall a traditional Chinese virtue) involves understanding one’s self in relation to the other.

Resistance to such heroic and humiliating national histories is growing, albeit slowly, and in academic and popular literature. Resistance is not about “getting it right,” to write the one true history of modern China. Defining “correct views”—even in terms of the textbook controversy with Japan—risks entailing yet another state management of knowledge practices. Far from telling us the true history of modern China, “national humiliation” is a floating signifier that has been used in multiple and contradictory ways: for the nation-state, for empire, for the PRC, and for Taiwan. Hence, resistance involves fragmenting and multiplying such linear modes of history and identity. In such narratives China is unique neither in its glorious civilization nor in its horrific humiliation, neither its national security needs nor its national insecurities. Resistance also comes from changing the subject from the high politics of diplomacy to the micronarratives of a “more comfortable lifestyle” highlighted by President Jiang Zemin, dissident Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian, and cult novelist Wang Shuo. A curious bunch of unlikely allies, if ever there was one.

Notes

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on this research. The Solzhenitsyn epigraph to this article is from Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex, eds., *The Ethnicity Reader* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997), p. 120.

1. See, for example, Robert E. Harkavy, "Defeat, National Humiliation, and the Revenge Motif in International Politics," *International Politics* 37 (2000): 345–368, and Edward Weisband, "Discursive Multilateralism: Global Benchmarks, Shame, and Learning in the ILO Labor Standards Monitoring Regime," *International Studies Quarterly* 44 (2000): 643–666.

2. Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (New York: Norton, 2000).

3. Marie Thorsten, "Shame to Vengeance: The Grand Cliché of the Japanese Superstate." See this issue of *Alternatives*.

4. See Gerard Toal [Gearóid Ó Tuathail], "Bosnia and American Shame," paper presented at the International Studies Association Conference, Chicago, February 2001.

5. As the *Atlas* points out in its foreword, this ambiguous grammar is much the same in Chinese: *Jindai Zhongguo bainian guochi dituji* (Atlas of the century of national humiliation in modern China) (Beijing: People's Press, 1997), p. 2.

6. See Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson, and Raymond Duval, eds., *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities and the Production of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

7. Zhongguo geming bowuguan [Revolutionary History Museum of China], ed., *Zhongguo: Cong quru zouxian huihuang* [China: From humiliation to glory], 1840–1997, vol. 1 (Beijing: Chinese National Photography Press, 1997); Guo Qifu, ed., *Wuwang guochi: Zaichuang huihuang* [Never forget national humiliation: Recreating the glory] (Wuhan University Press, 1996).

8. Robert Kagan and William Kristol, "A National Humiliation," *Weekly Standard* 6, no. 30 (2001), web edition. For an analysis of the politics of apology in this context, see Peter Hays Gries and Kaiping Peng, "Culture Clash? Apologies East and West," *Journal of Contemporary China* 11: 30 (2002): 173–178.

9. Gerrit W. Gong, "The Beginning of History: Remembering and Forgetting as Strategic Issues," *Washington Quarterly* (Spring 2001): 45–57; Lili Cole, "History and the Politics of Reconciliation," Carnegie Council project (2001): www.carnegiecouncil.org/themes/histrecintro.

10. Ian Buruma, "The Joys and Perils of Victimhood," *New York Review of Books*, April 8, 1999, pp. 4–9; Neil Renwick and Qing Cao, "China's Political Discourse towards the 21st Century: Victimhood, Identity, and Political Power," *East Asia* (1999): 111–143.

11. Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 5 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), p. 17.

12. David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 67.

13. Harkavy, note 1, 2000.

14. Campbell, note 12, p. 195.

15. William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, act 2, scene 1, lines 40–66.

16. David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 68–70.

17. Paul A. Cohen, "Remembering and Forgetting: National Humiliation in Twentieth-Century China," *Twentieth-Century China* 27, no. 2 (2002):

1–39; Luo Zhitian, “National Humiliation and National Assertion: the Chinese Response to the Twenty-one Demands,” *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 2 (1993): 297–319; Lucian W. Pye, *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, new ed. (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 67–84.

18. Guo Qifu, note 7, p. 1.

19. See He Yu, *Bainian guochi jiyao* (A summary of the century of national humiliation) (Beijing: Beijing Yanshan Press, 1997).

20. Guo, note 7, p. 126.

21. Zhou Shan and Zhang Chunbo, eds., *Guochi lu: Tushuo Zhonghua bainian* [A record of national humiliation: Pictures and stories of China’s century] (Lanzhou: Gansu Youth Press, 1997).

22. Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 14.

23. Jiang Zemin, “Report to the 15th Party Conference,” BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (September 15, 1997), web version.

24. Michael Yahuda, “Hong Kong: A New Beginning for China?” in *Hong Kong’s Transitions, 1842–1997*, Judith M. Brown and Rosemary Foot, eds. (London: Macmillan, 1997), 209; Gong, note 9, p. 47; Orville Schell, “Prisoner of Its Past,” *Salon*, June 8, 1999: www.Salon.com.

25. Lim Chang-Yuel, South Korean foreign minister, *Newshour* transcript (December 12, 1997), web version.

26. Jane Geaney, “Shame and Sensory Excess in Chinese Thought,” paper presented at the Eighth East-West Philosophers’ Conference, January 2000, Honolulu.

27. This modular notion of nationalism comes from Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

28. Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (New York: Norton, 1996), p. 78.

29. Geremie Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 90.

30. See *Yuanming yuan Ou’shi tingyuan* [Yuan Ming Garden Palace’s European-style buildings] (Beijing: Yuanming Garden Management Office Press, n.d. [c. 1998]), p. 103.

31. Wu Hung, “Ruins, Fragmentation, and the Chinese Modern/Post-modern,” in Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998), p. 60.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

33. Hu Huiqiang, et al., *Bainian fengyun shou yandi: Zhongguo geming bowuguan* [A century of turbulence displayed before our eyes: The Museum of Chinese Revolutionary History] (Beijing: China Encyclopedia Press, 1998), p. 5.

34. Wu Hung, note 31, p. 61.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

37. Chiang Kai-shek, *China’s Destiny* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1947), pp. 44–75.

38. Liu Zhen, *Guochi shigang* (Outline history of national humiliation) (Taipei: Zhengzhong Press, 1974), p. 1.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 180. Authors in the PRC now make similar arguments, demonstrating how deep anti-Russian feeling was after the Sino-Soviet split of 1960; see He Yu, note 19, p. 461.

40. Chiang Kai-shek, note 37, pp. 101–106; Liu Zhen, note 38, p. 212.

41. Liu Zhen, note 38, p. 31.

42. These activities are documented in two publications published in 1915. The *Guochi* [National humiliation], vol. 1, no. 1 (Shanghai) was a

magazine published in June 1915 to commemorate the Chinese government's bowing to the Twenty-one Demands. A book, similarly entitled *Guochi*, which gathers together newspaper reports and documents, was published later in 1915 (it was republished in 1973): Zhi Chi She [Sense of Shame Society], ed., *Guochi* (Taipei: Wenhai Press, 1973). Also see Luo Zhitian, note 17, pp. 31–12; and Cohen, note 17, pp. 4–17.

43. Luo Zhitian, note 17, p. 310.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 310–12; Cohen, note 17, 26.

45. *Renmin ribao*, April 28, 2001: web version.

46. Jiang Gongsheng, *Guochi shi* [A history of national humiliation] (Shanghai: Xinhua Press, 1927), pp. 54–55, 45.

47. See *Jindai Zhongguo*, note 5, p. 49.

48. Fang Yan et al., *Quangiuhua yinxiang xiade zhongguo zhi lu* [China's road under the shadow of globalization] (Beijing: Social Science Press, 1999).

49. Wu Chunguang, *Taipingyangshangde jiaoli: Dangdai Zhongguo de haiyang zhanlue wenti* [Pacific disputes: Contemporary China's maritime strategy] (Beijing: Today's China Press, 1998), back cover.

50. Feng Renzhao, "The Hongkongnese: Who Are the Hongkongnese?" *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 30: 3 (1998): 39. For a detailed discussion of national humiliation and Hong Kong, see William A. Callahan, *Contested States: Greater China and International Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), chapter 5.

51. Interviews in China, August 2001.

52. See Barmé, note 29, pp. 89–95; and Cohen, note 17, pp. 218–219.

53. Sport is commonly used to represent war, and vice versa. See Michael J. Shapiro, "Representing World Politics: The Sport/War Intertext," in *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics*, James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro, eds. (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 69–96.

54. Wang Shuo, *Please Don't Call Me Human*, Howard Goldblatt, trans. (London: No Exit Press, 2000), p. 253. The novel was originally published in 1989.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 278.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

58. Wu Hung, note 31, p. 62.

59. *China News Digest*, April 2, 2001: www.cnd.org.

60. Wang Shuo, note 54, p. 11.

61. Akira Kurosawa, *Rashomon* (1950).