

“Never forget national humiliation”

While the whole world is talking about China’s rise, all focus has been placed on understanding China’s present policies and future orientations. However, very little attention is still devoted to examining China’s colonial past and how the post-colonial consciousness affects present China. For many people, especially those from the countries of China’s “ex-colonial aggressors,” the notion that time heals all wounds is often taken for granted. Many also assume that China’s recent successes have provided healing for its historical wounds. Unfortunately, this assumption is wrong.

Zheng Wang

OVER THE PAST THREE DECADES, it is true that China has undergone a tremendous transformation; no longer weak and isolated, it is now a strong state that has the power to impact global affairs. However, the Chinese have not really moved forward from their past humiliation. Chinese historical consciousness of the so-called *Bainian guochi* (a century of national humiliation) still plays a powerful role, affecting Chinese politics, foreign relations, and national psyche. *Bainian guochi* is a term the Chinese have used to refer to the period from the outbreak of the first Opium War in 1839 until the end of World War II in 1945. In this century, China was attacked, bullied, and torn asunder by imperialists.

In fact, China’s new accomplishments and growing confidence have actually often served to strengthen this historical consciousness. They have, at times, served to activate, not assuage, people’s memory of the past humiliation. This is why it is very important for today’s people to understand the Chinese historical consciousness. China’s rise should not be understood through a single lens like economics or military growth, but rather viewed through a more comprehensive lens which takes national identity and domestic discourse into account. In this article, I will report on Chinese discourse of its colonial past by introducing a sculpture, a textbook and a poem.

Never forget: a sculpture

Museums and public monuments have played very important roles in the formation of a national memory and identity in different societies. Today, the Chinese people are living in a forest of monuments, all of which are used to represent the past to its citizens.

September 18 Historical Museum was built in Shenyang, a city in northeast China, in 1991. 18 September 1931 is an important date in the Chinese collective memory. On this day, the Japanese army, which had been occupying parts of Manchuria since the first Sino-Japanese War, launched a surprise attack on Shenyang and began its full-scale invasion of China. Within a week, the Japanese had conquered most of Manchuria. According to Chinese historical narrative, the fourteen years from 1931 to 1945 under Japanese occupation were the darkest period of Chinese history and the most painful memory for many Chinese.

To commemorate this incident, the Chinese constructed this museum, located on the exact site where the attack occurred in 1931. As depicted in figure 1, the outer appearance of the museum depicts a large, very impressive sculpture designed to look like an open calendar. This calendar is inscribed with the date 18 September, as the Chinese hoped that through this particular construction, future generations would not forget this historic date. The sculpture serves as a permanent reminder of this humiliating piece of history.

On the other side of the museum, a huge bronze bell engraved with the four Chinese characters *Wuwan Guochi* (勿忘國耻), meaning “Never Forget National Humiliation”, has been erected. In figure 2, a group of students are listening to a senior citizen, a victim of the Japanese invasion, telling her stories. Not far from the bell, there is a huge marble stone inscribed on former Chinese President Jiang Zemin’s dedication “Never forget September 18” (*Wuwan 9-18*).

Although people all over the world cherish their own memorials, the special effort made by the Chinese government to construct memory sites and use them for ideological reeducation is unparalleled. As part of the contents of the “Patriotic Education Campaign” beginning in 1991, Beijing required local governments of all levels to establish “patriotic education bases.” Visiting these memory sites has become a regular part of school curriculum.¹

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1 (top right):
The September 18
Historical Museum
in Shenyang.

2 (bottom right):
“Never Forget
National Humiliation”



Postcolonial consciousness and China's rise



Lest you forget: a textbook

On 5 April 2005, the Japanese Education Ministry approved a new junior high school textbook titled *Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho* (new history textbook), written by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform. This move ignited immediate outrage among some Asian countries, especially China and South Korea. Critics have charged that this organization has been revising history textbooks to minimize Japan's culpability for its wartime actions.

According to critics, the textbook provides a distorted and self-serving account of Japan's colonial and wartime activities. For example, you will find no mention of the "Nanjing Massacre." Indeed, there is only one sentence that refers to this event: "they [the Japanese troops] occupied that city in December." The editors of the book added a footnote here, which makes the first, and only, direct reference to The Nanjing/Nanking Incident: "At this time, many Chinese soldiers and civilians were killed or wounded by Japanese troops (the Nanking Incident). Documentary evidence has raised doubts about the actual number of victims claimed by the incident. The debate continues even today."²

On 9 April 2005, an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 Chinese demonstrators marched to the Japanese Embassy in Beijing, throwing stones at the facility. The next day, 20,000 protesters demonstrated in two cities in southern Guangdong Province (see figure 3), and protesters attacked a Japanese department store in Shenzhen. Two weeks after the approval of the textbook, anti-Japanese protests broke out in more than ten Chinese cities. In each case, protesters chanted slogans and burned Japanese flags. People carried banners with slogans reading: "Japan must apologize to China," "Never forget national humiliation," and "Boycott Japanese goods."

Anybody who has visited the *Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall* will have a better understanding as to why the Chinese are so angry over this Japanese textbook. A huge stone wall at the entrance of the Memorial Hall has the death toll inscribed as "Victims 300,000". The word "victim" is engraved in Chinese, English, and Japanese. The decision to make this figure recognizable in three different languages illustrates the Chinese insistence on the number of casualties. Visitors will also notice that another monument at the memorial depicts the same number of 300,000 casualties, but in eleven different languages (see figure 4). These two monuments are testaments to historical controversy, as they highlight how a group of people chooses to remember their historical narrative.

One may wonder why history education and history textbooks in particular are important enough to fight over. For countries like China and Korea, while they teach their younger generation to never forget their traumatic past, they cannot accept their "ex-colonial aggressors" hiding this part of history from their own youth. History textbooks thus become a source of conflict in East Asia.

What do you want from us: a poem

In an article in *Forbes Magazine* in 2008, Lee Kuan Yew, the former Premier of Singapore, quoted a Chinese poem³ (see left). Reading this poem, Lee, as one of the few world leaders knowledgeable of both Western and Eastern culture, said that he was sad to see "the gulf in understanding" between Chinese and Westerners. This poem illustrates the obvious Chinese frustration at not being understood, and the great perceptual divide between Chinese and Westerners.

The poem is striking in its simplicity in understanding history. Some statements are also based on myths. For example, the phrase, "Sick Man of East Asia," is actually the Chinese people's imaged humiliation, as it was initially utilized to describe the weak and corrupt condition of the Qing Empire, with no actual reference to the health or physique of the Chinese people.

However, this anonymous Chinese poem represents a typical postcolonial discourse. It has been widely distributed and discussed in Internet chat rooms, and many conclude that this poem aptly reflects Chinese sentiment. Westerners may perceive the incidents listed in this poem as independent and incomparable events that happened over an extended period of time. Many Chinese, however, view these events as current, and feel closely connected with what happened one hundred years ago. The "century of humiliation" has provided the Chinese with plenty of historical analogies to use, and they often draw parallels between current and historical events. The legacy of history has provided the Chinese with the lens that they use to interpret current issues. Without understanding this special postcolonial sentiment, it is impossible for the West to fully understand current Chinese behaviors and its future intentions.

3 (Top left):
Protesting the new
Japanese textbook.

4 (Middle left):
300,000 victims in
eleven languages –
let there be no
mistake or doubt
about how many
victims there were.



What do you want from us?
When we were the Sick Man of Asia,
We were called the Yellow Peril.
When we are billed to be the next superpower,
We are called The Threat.
When we closed our doors,
You smuggled drugs to open markets.
When we embrace free trade,
You blame us for taking away your jobs.
When we were falling apart,
You marched in your troops and wanted your fair share.
When we tried to put the broken pieces back together again,
Free Tibet you screamed. It was an Invasion!
When we tried Communism,
You hated us for being Communist.
When we embrace Capitalism,
You hate us for being Capitalist.
When we had a billion people,
You said we were destroying the planet.
When we tried limiting our numbers,
You said we abused human rights.
When we were poor, you thought we were dogs.
When we loan you cash, you blame us for your national debts.
When we build our industries,
You call us Polluters.
When we sell you goods,
You blame us for global warming.
When we buy oil,
You call it exploitation and genocide.
...
What do you really want from us?
Think hard first, then answer ...⁴

"Never Forget": national ideas

According to Jeffrey Legro, many societies have "dominant ideas" or "national ideas", which he defined as "the collective beliefs of societies and organizations about how to act."⁵ I believe that Chinese people's historical consciousness of its colonial past and the belief that China must "never forget national humiliation" are the dominant ideas in China's public rhetoric. National ideas are difficult to change, as they become ingrained in public rhetoric and bureaucratic procedures that make them resilient like all traditions that are institutionally entrenched. These ideas often unconsciously but profoundly influence people's perceptions and actions. One cannot understand China's current situation without knowing China's past. Historical memory is the most useful key to unlocking the inner mystery of the Chinese, as it is the prime raw material for constructing China's national identity.

Looking at historical memory is not just a look at the past; instead, uncovering historical memory is a progressive look forward in understanding where China is trying to go. If we want to understand China's intentions we must first understand the building blocks of Chinese intentions. Who we think we are defines what we think we want. Understanding Chinese national identity from this perspective can give insight into who China is seeking to become as it makes its rapid rise. For example, while people in the world are talking about China's rise, the Chinese like to use another word: *rejuvenation* (*faxing*). By choosing the word "rejuvenation" (复兴), the Chinese emphasize their determination to wipe out past humiliations and to restore themselves to their former glory. The word "rejuvenation" is deeply rooted in China's historical memory.

For the purpose of understanding a country, the orthodox research approach focuses on collecting political, socioeconomic, and security data, and then conducting macro-analysis of institutions, policies, and decision-making. Such an approach, however, has critical limitations for understanding the deep structure and dynamics of the country. I would suggest that to understand a country, one should visit the country's memory sites and primary schools, and read their history textbooks. A nation's history is not merely a recounting of its past; what individuals and countries remember and what they choose to forget are telling indicators of their current values, perceptions, and even their aspirations.

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Notes

- 1 Wang, Zheng. "National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory." *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008).
- 2 Kanji, Nishio, et al., eds. *Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho*, [New History Textbook]. Tokyo: Fusosha, 2005.49
- 3 Kuan Yew Lee, "Two Images of China," *Forbes*, June 16, 2008.
- 4 The full text of this poem can be read from the *Washington Post*: "What Do You Really Want From Us?" *Washington Post*, May 18, 2008, accessed 15 February 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/4br8eze>
- 5 Legro, Jeffrey W. "What China Will Want: The Future Intentions of a Rising Power." *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 3 (2007). 515.