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### Book Review: Zheng Wang. *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*

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**Zheng Wang. *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations.*  
New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.**

Reviewed by Constance Wilkinson

“**Never Forget National Humiliation!**”? Really? Yes. This is Zheng Wang’s very interesting study of the post-Mao Chinese Communist Party’s massive re-education campaign. It was created in the years following the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989 when post-Mao CCP hard-liners approved a military response to civilian protesters that would crush China’s emerging pro-democracy movement.

Zheng Wang points out that Tiananmen is one of many events “that have been formally ignored by the Chinese government...Beijing has even gone so far as to ban the mere discussion of specific events it would choose to forget.” (p.6)

Zheng Wang’s book describes “how the legitimacy-challenged Chinese Communist Party has used history education as an instrument for the glorification of the party, for the consolidation of national identity, and for the justification of the political system of the CCP’s one-party rule in the post-Tiananmen and post-Cold War eras.” (p.9)

On the face of it, it seems peculiar to recommend that Chinese patriots keep national humiliation in mind, like pouring fresh salt into old wounds, wounds inflicted by certain historic events. “Never forget!” is one thing; “continually marinate in victimization” is quite another.

Yet, as Zheng Wang informs us, that *is* indeed a patriot’s duty according to the CCP’s Patriotic Education Campaign platform of 1991. It is the duty of patriots to focus on China’s miserable foreign-devil-victimized past, thus, to become more motivated to work harder and *harder* to re-gain the stolen glory of China. Thus, the new CCP party line: “*Never* forget national humiliation!” Really. Seriously. Never get over it.

As Zheng Wang reminds us, even Republic of China Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek never got over it (p.80). For decades, Zheng Wang tells us, Chiang Kai-Shek wrote in his daily diary just such an exhortation: “*Xuechi!*” (“Avenge humiliation! Wipe clean humiliation!”) (p.81). The post-Mao post-Tiananmen CCP is happy to take this ball and run with it, to create an official state narrative of victimization, humiliation, and blame. In this book, Professor Zheng Wang tells us why and how they did so. (p.191)

In Chapter 1, “Historical Memory, Identity, and Politics,” the author presents prior studies relevant to understanding the “function of historical memory in group identity formation and how historical memory influences people’s perceptions, interpretations, and decision-making processes, especially in a conflict or crisis situation” (p.19).

Wang presents two frameworks for empirical research. The first seeks to measure collective identity and the second seeks to analyze the effect of historical memory on beliefs. This chapter sets the stage for what follows.

In Chapter 2, “Chosen Glory, Chosen Trauma,” Zheng Wang discusses how China’s past experiences have worked to shape China’s national identity — its sense of self. He makes use of Norwegian sociologist and peace-theoretician Johan Galtung’s Chosenness-Myth-Trauma lens. Three cultural dimensions comprise the: “Chosenness-Myth-Trauma-Complex”<sup>1</sup> (p.41). It is worth noting that Galtung’s C-M-T complex is not a neutral concept, but one that reveals civilizational psychopathology. The chosenness-myth-trauma complex can be regarded as “*the collective megaloparanoia syndrome.*”<sup>2</sup>

Wang applies Galtung’s C-M-T lens to China as follows: China’s Chosen Chosenness: an attitude of inherent superiority. Since ancient times, China is and always has regarded itself as special; that is, they are “chosen” because they live in *tianxia*, All-Under-Heaven, the Middle Kingdom, the center of the entire world. (p.42) (As Galtung points out elsewhere, “Chosen-ness induces collective sentiments of grandeur relative to all others.”<sup>3</sup>)

China’s Chosen Myth: that it possesses limitless virtue and good qualities. Since ancient times, China self-perception is that it is very embodiment of civilization and good qualities. Peace-loving, benevolent, better than anyone else and everyone else (p.43) (p.125). “China is<sup>4</sup> the world, not just ‘a country in the world’ (p.71). This is reflected in Zheng Wang’s mention of a Chinese official’s officious letter to Queen Victoria, in which he condescendingly scolds her, saying she must check her “barbarian merchants” and “show further the sincerity of your politeness and submissiveness” toward China (p.39).

Chosen Trauma: China’s trauma is not due to its own errors but is due to having been victimized by *other*, lesser nations (p.68). Since “until 1840, China considered itself...the only true civilization, (p.68) its *tianxia* view made China “unable to acknowledge an international world of formally equal states.”

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<sup>1</sup> “*Chosenness*, the idea of being a people chosen by transcendental forces, above all others, endowed, even anointed, to be a light unto others, with the right and even the duty to govern them; *trauma*, of being a people hit and hurt by others, possibly out of their envy, by enemies lurking anywhere, intent on hitting again; *myths of a glorious past*, near or distant, to be recreated.” Galtung, J. Are There Therapies for Bad Cosmologies?” *Medicine and War*, Vol. II, p. 172

<sup>2</sup> ” Galtung, p. 172

<sup>3</sup> ” Galtung, p. 172

<sup>4</sup> Emphasis mine.

By the time of the First Opium War and lasting over the next century, China's mythic *tianxia* ego began to deflate. At the start, China had been, in her own eyes, the natural ruler of the universe. However, over time, it became shockingly clear that ignorant Western barbarian nations were oblivious to this eternal truth. Even worse, the "dwarf pirate" (p.81) people of Japan, once China's vassal, had ceased to remain submissive. Continuing throughout "the century of humiliation" (p.47), China's glory repeatedly was besmirched by experiences of weakness and defeat at the hands of foreign-devil Western powers and by foreign devil Japan. All these states disrespected China and humiliated China with their bullying, unequal treaties and their victorious armies, such that "with each new humiliation, the Chinese lost a little bit of their national myth of greatness," (p.68) inflicting painful, narcissistic wounds.

Absent a *century of humiliation* of glorious China by mean foreign bully nations, there would have been no *need* for reform in China, and no need for revolution(s) (p.68). Civil war and bloody revolutions in China were the fault of mean, greedy, bloody barbarian non-Chinese foreign nations' actions, while China remains glorious by means of its blamelessness.

Chapter 3, "From 'All-Under-Heaven' to a Nation-State: National Humiliation and Nation Building" concerns the Chinese Communist Party's nation-building challenge: how to construct a new national identity suitable to modern times, and suitable to taking its place on the international stage. However, China's mythic stance of inherent superiority "made it difficult for China to adapt psychologically to the new reality of international affairs. China was not prepared to join the family of nations as an equal member" — because how *could* it be equal when it was in fact superior? (p.73)

Thus began China's process of adjusting its self-identity, painfully proceeding through the periods of the late Qing, the Republic, the initial Chinese Communist Party, the Maoist Chinese Communist Party, the post-Maoist Chinese Communist Party, and the Post-Tiananmen Square Massacre Chinese Communist Party, the latter still in power today.

Chapter 4, "From Victim to Victor: The Patriotic Education Campaign," shows why and how the Post-Tiananmen Square Massacre Chinese Communist Party rewrote the Chinese national narrative. Having crushed the grassroots Chinese pro-democracy movement in 1989, the post-Tiananmen Massacre CCP worked on how best to regain its authoritarian power, eliminate the threat of democracy in China, and retain the Party's iron grip on power in China. Perhaps frightened by the threat of democracy and even civil war, the Post-Massacre CCP created an inescapable propaganda framework built on a pro-CCP, anti-democracy, anti-western frame, one that historian James Harrison called "the most massive attempt at ideological re-education in human history." (p.96)

The Post-Tiananmen Chinese Communist Party devoted years to crafting and carrying out this re-education campaign to burnish its image and gain legitimacy and popular sympathy and (of course) more political power under the frame of “making our motherland strong, the people prosperous, and the nation immensely rejuvenated.” (p.133)

Zheng Wang demonstrates that the ideological re-education goals outlined in 1994 were specific:

to boost the nation’s spirit, enhance cohesion, foster national self-esteem and pride, consolidate and develop a patriotic united front to the broadest extent possible, and direct and rally the masses’ patriotic passions to the great cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics. (p.99)

It was also, as Zheng Wang quotes William Callahan, “an effort to re-direct young people’s anger away from the party.” (p.100). Younger individuals “had to be reintroduced to the imperialist past, to re-experience its bitterness and shame” (p.100) while magically making memory of a massacre disappear.

Chapter 5, “From Vanguard to Patriot: Reconstructing the Chinese Communist Party,” explains how the post-Tiananmen CCP used the theme of national humiliation to achieve the political ends previously mentioned and create social cohesion. Wang reminds us that “the more we identify with our group, the more we will differentiate our group from other groups.” (p.125)

This process is exemplified by the work of post-TSM CCP master propagandist patriotic re-branding revisionist re-educator Jiang Zemin, who ran with that ball, dividing people “into two categories: the ‘ardent patriots’ and the ‘scum of the nation.’” One can’t get more binary than that, can one? (p.125). Patriotic citizens “should hate the foreign invaders, despise traitors, and respect patriots.” (p.125). Everyone must study and keep in mind national humiliation. Chinese leaders who followed Jiang, Hu Jintao, and Wen Jiabao among them, were happy to keep that Neo-Foreign Devil re-frame going, utilizing “China’s past history of humiliation to awaken the people’s historical consciousness and build cohesion.” (p.140)

In 1995, 100 sites were identified as demonstration bases for national patriotic education (p.105). Forty sites are dedicated to external wars (battlefields, museums, memorials), that is, military conflicts with Japan, Russian, India, the Netherlands, the Boxer Uprising’s eight ally nations, and so on. Twenty-four sites commemorate the 1927-1949 KMT-CCP Chinese civil war. Twenty-one sites are dedicated to myths of glory: wonders of architecture and ancient civilization (15 sites); prehistoric sites (4); achievements after 1949 (2 sites). Fifteen sites are dedicated to heroes: CCP leaders, model workers, patriots.

More than 350 million visitors have flocked to these patriotic education bases since the re-education campaign began. Supported by the government, these sites receive “a large number of organized visits from schools, army groups, and government agencies.” (p.106). Visitors to the “Memorial Hall for Compatriots Killed in the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Forces of Aggression” will see a huge stone wall at the entrance with the death toll inscribed as ‘Victims: 300,000.’” (p.58). The Japanese attack on Shenyang is memorialized by the September 18<sup>th</sup> Historical Museum . . . built (in 1991) on the exact site where the attack occurred in 1931.” (p.56) The Museum features a large bronze bell engraved with four characters meaning “Never Forget National Humiliation.” (p.56)

Chapter 6, “From Earthquake to Olympics: New Trauma, New Glory” analyzes China’s behavior during two world events in terms of historical memory as used by the post-Tiananmen Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese Communist Party co-opted hosting the Olympics to inflate its appreciation of itself, to harvest glorious success on the world stage, and to trumpet it in all directions. Each gold medal won by China helped to accrue more glory (although, sadly, anything less than gold equaled humiliation and defeat).

Wang next recounts China’s response to a disastrous earthquake, and how the state propaganda media coverage was used as way to accrue glory for China, as it provided an opportunity to show China’s people and show the world their bravery, fearlessness, and ability to conquer adversity.

Chapter 7, “Memory, Crises, and Foreign Relations” applies the Chosenness-Myth-Trauma Complex to explain China’s behavioral response to crises happening on the world stage. To me, most interesting among them was his discussion of the NATO-US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia.

Zheng Wang cites notes of discussions from the CCP elite in which their anger is based on feeling insulted. The US apologized repeatedly, framing the incident as due to a technical error in targeting. The Chinese were so furious that the CCP government itself incited violent student demonstrations to threaten US Embassies, the first large demonstrations to occur since the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. It was a notable over-reaction, not unlike the great re-education campaign.

Chapter 8 is entitled “Memory, Textbooks, and Sino-Japanese Reconciliation” and concerns just that, presenting a perspective of reconciliation and peacebuilding through the joint writing/re-writing of history. Chapter 9, on “Memory, History, and China’s Rise,” reviews the main points of the book, and “how the lenses of history and memory facilitate a better understanding of China’s rise, intentions, and nationalism.” (p.15)

Zheng Wang's book inspired in this reader renewed curiosity about and appreciation of Chinese history, ancient and modern. Through his analysis, I discovered the modular nature of modern Chinese history. Deletions. Insertions. Historic events swapped IN and OUT like LEGOs—red for green; green for blue; sometimes back to red again, according to propaganda needs of the era.

Thus, for Chiang Kai-Shek:

“Never Forget National Humiliation!” narrative? IN!

“Foreign Devils, Bad Treaties!” frame? IN!

“Rape of Nanking” memory IN!

Nationalism? IN!

While, for Mao:

“Rape of Nanking”? OUT! (Delete because it reminds minds of KMT's military victory).

Humiliation narrative? OUT! (Blame class enemies.)

Chinese Nationalism? OUT! (Too Chiang Kai-Shek-y.)

International Communist internationalism? IN!

Great Famine Due to CCP Incompetence? DELETE.

Genocidal Imperialist Aggression Toward Tibet? DELETE.

For Post-Mao Chinese Communist Party:

Damage Done by the Great Leap Forward? DELETE.

Social Trauma Due to Cultural Revolution? DELETE.

CCP Fears Losing Mandate-of-Heaven Legitimacy? NOPE. DON'T MENTION IT.

Rising Calls for Democracy? SUPPRESS. DENY.

Then, Tiananmen.

Tiananmen Square Massacre? DELETE. DENY.

Never Forget National Humiliation? INSERT. LATHER, RINSE, REPEAT: NEW ENEMY!

Zheng Wang analyzes China's aggressive response to a spy plane incident in 2001, saying the “collision between [a] Chinese fighter plane and [a] U.S. spy plane developed into an unexpected clash of face and pride” (p.189). Although the US plane had been flying over international waters, Chinese fighter planes attacked the US plane anyway, after which expansionist China behaved as if *China* were the aggrieved party: “US Flies Plane Over International Waters to Insult China!”

Why so touchy? Because, says Zheng Wang, “the legitimacy of China's current rulers is highly dependent upon successful performance on the international stage” (p.189).

Likewise, CCP China's reaction to the US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade seems an over-reaction. Zheng Wang includes in his book detailed notes of a heated discussion among CCP leaders: "A quick content analysis of those remarks indicates that, of the seven top leaders, five of them used the term *provocation* and *insult*, four of them regarded the bombing as *bullying* or used terms such as *dignity* or *humiliation*, four of them directly called the bombing a *plot* or *ploy*." Zheng Wang notes China's outsized response and he does include the possibility that the bombing was not accidental. (p.176)<sup>5</sup> This makes China's angry response more understandable, and its sense of having been insulted. It might be framed as "US Insults China by Catching China's Belgrade Embassy Red-Handed Forwarding Secret NATO Military Targets Information, So US on Behalf of NATO Precision-Bombs China's Embassy at Night Removing Military Threat," all the while mendaciously maintaining in public that it was just an accident, so sorry. Humiliating indeed.

Zheng Wang's book is inspiring and thought-provoking. It helps us to appreciate why the post-Tiananmen Massacre CCP went to such lengths to turn popular attention *away* from an annoying proto-democracy movement and *toward* inflammatory nation-building, set on a propaganda foundation whereby rejuvenating China means regaining its status as the center of the world. Its spin is anti-western-nations, anti-Japan, anti-democracy. It revives the myth of Chinese Supremacy. It encourages a pervasive contempt for all other cultures while blaming all those lesser cultures for China's inferiority complex. Never forget national humiliation, after all. Keep those grudges simmering.

The author states:

The empirical core of this book is concentrated on decoding one of the most misunderstood and least addressed elements in Chinese politics today — historical memory. Without directly addressing Chinese nationalism, I have used historical memory to explain the cultural and historical foundations of that nationalism.

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<sup>5</sup> Guardian article <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/oct/17/balkans>. "NATO deliberately bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the war in Kosovo after discovering it was being used to transmit Yugoslav army communications. According to senior military and intelligence sources in Europe and the US, the Chinese embassy was removed from a prohibited targets list after NATO electronic intelligence (Elint) detected it sending army signals to Milosevic's forces. . . **The Chinese may have calculated that NATO would not dare strike its embassy**, but the five-storey building was *emptied every night of personnel*. Only three people died in the attack, two of whom were, reportedly, not journalists - the official Chinese version - but intelligence officers."

As this analysis has indicated, an understanding of the politics of historical memory is essential to comprehending the linkage between the top-down state nationalism and popular social nationalism, the conditions and circumstances that ignite nationalist movements, and the controversies between globalism and nationalism in China. (p.236)

This book concentrates on the CCP's rehabilitation of itself after Tiananmen; he details this massive propaganda campaign to regain CCP power and glory, strip power from dissidents, and inflame their populace with propaganda about who is the real enemy of the people and who are the glorious patriots.

Marinating China's populace in the miseries of their historical past seems an unhealthy response to deep socio-political trauma. It is, in fact, introducing a kind of poisoned truth as a subject for social worship. China's classic practice of merrily re-writing history-to-order is highlighted by this propaganda campaign: delete mention/memory of certain inconvenient events (p.242) lest they diminish national self-esteem and tarnish glory; insert/highlight alternative facts/memories more relevant to preserving stability/control. By which I mean, retaining power.

This propaganda strategy has been effective; the post-TM CCP has indeed retained political power and control over China. However, this strategy of wallowing in woundedness can also be seen as unwise and morally unsound. It can be viewed not as evidence of China's strength, but of China's weakness, its fragile state ego, lack of insight, and lack of a social conscience. The Post-Mao, post-Tiananmen Massacre Chinese Communist Party clings to power by propping up China's sense of self, inflating its ego, and nursing its narcissistic injuries by wallowing in them.

This is a very problematic pattern. A nation-state that can never accept blame for its own actual errors, while consistently putting the blame on inferior foreign "others," is not a state headed toward healthy civilizational growth.