

National Humiliation in China

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RYAN KILPATRICK, OCT 20 2011

The titular character of Lu Xun's most revered work of fiction, *The True Story of Ah Q*, is famed for finding a form of victory in even the most debasing instances of defeat, claiming moral and spiritual superiority over all those who surpass him, but convincing only himself. Lu Xun's allegory for the pride and pettiness of the Chinese national character in the early 20th century is still relevant today; but whereas Ah Q habitually convinces himself at times of defeat that he is in fact the victor, contemporary China is equally determined to convince itself in times of triumph that it is the perennial loser.

For the last century, the narrative of national humiliation has been an enduring framework through which scholars and common people alike have interpreted China's recent history. The term itself was first coined in 1915 in response to Japan's 21 Demands, made upon China on 7 May that year, and Yuan Shikai's subsequent concession to them on 9 May—two days thenceforth singled out for annual celebrations of National Humiliation Day (Luo, 310). However, although the so-called Century of National Humiliation is generally regarded as having begun with the First Opium War (1839-42), there is far less agreement over when it ended, or indeed if it has ended at all. In 1945, Chiang Kai-shek claimed to have ended the Century of National Humiliation by achieving victory over the invading Japanese and securing China's position as one of the key victors of the post-war order, with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and uncontested recognition worldwide. In declaring that China had at last 'stood up' in 1949, Mao too was claiming authorship for the end of national humiliation. Yet when Chinese 'volunteers' fought American troops to a standstill in Korea, their pyrrhic victory over the world's strongest military power was again cast as the final cleansing of national humiliation. Decades later in 1997, Jiang Zemin believed he was overseeing the end to the Century—now a century and a half—by reuniting Hong Kong with the Chinese mainland and thus making the country whole again, washing away the final reminder of the attempted dismemberment of China. In 2008 many saw the Olympics in Beijing as finally cleansing national humiliation, by realising China's '100 year dream' of hosting the games and showing the world that China was a capable, powerful and culturally rich nation. However, others are still not satisfied and claim that the Century of National Humiliation will continue until Taiwan is brought back under the control of Beijing (Gries, 57).

To this day, China's unresolved trauma of the 19th century cannot be exorcised. Long after the 'Century' itself was meant to have ended in 1949, rhetoric of national humiliation is constantly employed to explain contemporary diplomatic crises such as Beijing's unsuccessful 1993 bid to host the summer Olympics, the 1999 Belgrade embassy bombing, and even the 2001 spy plane collision off the coast of Hainan (Callahan, 499). Evidently, China's Century of National Humiliation is not a time frame or a historical period at all—it is a mental space, the boundaries of which are continually re-shifted in order to meet the needs of those in power, as they invent new narratives to meet contemporary crises of legitimacy, astutely following Mao's dictum to 'make the past serve the present' (Gries, 46).

Although national humiliation enjoyed a golden age in the 1920s, it largely fell out of favour over the course of the Second Sino-Japanese War. After Japan's surrender in 1945, a new narrative of China-as-victor gained momentum. The country had successfully resisted Japanese conquest and had emerged as one of the Big Four victors in the post-war order, together with the United States, the Soviet Union and Great Britain. Nanjing had earned a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and was regarded as the new regional power for East Asia. China, at this time, had a lot to be proud of, and, after the horrors they had suffered at the hands of the Japanese, had a diminished appetite for self-debasement. After Communist victory in 1949, attention was then shifted to more positive Marxist themes of

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class struggle and revolutionary victory. Official propaganda painted China as a triumphant, self-assured nation that had thrown off its shackles and now stood at the vanguard of world revolution, ready to take on the 'paper tiger' of imperialism and emerge victorious, as it had done in Korea. According to National Library of China records in Beijing, no national humiliation textbooks were published between 1937, the year open hostilities broke out between China and Japan, and 1990, when the movement was suddenly revived in the wake of the Tiananmen Square crackdown (Callahan, 35). The conservative backlash and lurch back to nationalism that followed from June 1989 led directly to Patriotic Education Movement in 1991, and thereby the renaissance of National Humiliation discourse.

Tiananmen Square had revealed the extent to which Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought had lost credibility in a China still revering from the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, and how many young people in China were beginning to find internal sources for China's problems, questioning the legitimacy of the Communist Party and looking to the West for examples of alternative forms of governance. The revival of the national humiliation story was intended to socialise young Chinese into keen patriots, too preoccupied with cleansing the country's humiliations abroad to concern themselves with reform at home—and in this it was remarkably successful. The contrast between student demonstrators marching beneath the Statue of Liberty-style Goddess of Democracy in 1989 and the students hurling bricks at the US embassy in 1999 and denouncing American democracy is a clear illustration of how effective the campaign has been in shifting the focus in China from domestic to international crises.

Contemporary Chinese nationalism is greatly preoccupied with the past, which it is constantly reworking. Cultural critic Geremie Barme has gone so far as to suggest that 'every policy shift in recent Chinese history has involved the rehabilitation, re-evaluation and revision of history and historical figures (Gries, 46). However, the Century of National Humiliation is not a linear history; it is an emotional and moral discourse that transcends party lines and is firmly planted at the grassroots, establishing itself as the common-sense means of understanding China's modern history. China figures into this narrative as a magnificent civilisation uniquely threatened by immoral barbarians, the innocent and blameless victim of international bullying and unwarranted imperialism. China is thus portrayed as inherently peaceful, fully disregarding the fact that China's long history is typified—like any other country's—by periods of violent expansion, the outcome of which are the present national borders of China which are portrayed as eternal and immutable. Also ignored is the fact that from 1949-79 China was involved in military conflicts an average of once every five years, as well as the 'national humiliation' that China has meted upon other nations, for example the invasion and occupation of Korea in the late 19th century (Callahan, 21). The humiliation narrative also fails to acknowledge China's most recent disasters—the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and the June 4 massacre—the blame for which lie solely with China's ruling Communist Party.

This fixation with pride and humiliation produces a strong desire for international affirmation that is ultimately self-defeating: when China tries to assert its new-found power by bullying smaller neighbours, it merely suggests hegemonic intentions; when they desperately try to hide any blemishes from international audiences they merely become a laughing stock; and when they harass journalists whom they perceive as 'anti-China' the government simply admits to its own insecurity and lack of confidence in its institutions and the basis of its legitimacy. Genuine victimhood brings with it moral authority, but national humiliation is often informed by conceptions of China's 'rightful place in the world', an idea that engenders suspicion of China in other countries.

The American journalist Rodney Gilbert, writing from Shanghai in 1929, recalled that the Republican movement in China had not always been anti-foreign, for 'young China had great faith in herself. She believed in her superiority and was confident that all she needed to prove it was freedom from corrupt, reactionary Manchu autocracy.' When the post-1911 Republic produced little more than disintegration and corruption and Han warlords proved even crueller and more self-serving than the deposed Manchu autocrats, Gilbert claims that anti-foreignism was invented as an apology for China's failures. Although he was himself an ardent apologist for Western imperialism, Gilbert raises a relevant point when he suggests that national humiliation was 'an idea that had never occurred to any Chinese while they believed in their own ability to rehabilitate their country' (Gilbert, 214-6). Looking to the future, whether or not China will ever again feel confident and hopeful enough to repudiate the angry indignation of national humiliation is one of the most significant questions shaping the rise of 21st century China.

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