

Review - Never Forget National Humiliation

Written by Robert Weatherley

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ROBERT WEATHERLEY, MAY 8 2013

Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations

By: Zheng Wang

New York: Columbia University Press, 2012

During an informal conversation with the late German sinologist Jurgen Domes in 1993, I was told in no uncertain terms that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would lose power within the next five years. To be fair, Domes was not the only sinologist at the time who was (eagerly, in his case) prophesising the impending demise of the party. Other thinkers (such as Jack Gray) spoke out in a similar manner during the first few years after the 1989 Tiananmen military crackdown and frankly who can blame them? With the collapse of Eastern European communism still very fresh in the mind and with the People's Republic of China (PRC) neatly positioned as number one in the league table of international pariahs, the end of the CCP certainly appeared to be nigh.

Fast forward twenty years or so and, against all the odds, the party is still firmly in office. The scholarly consensus suggests, quite rightly, that this is due to a combination of economic reform and nationalism. The party's success in re-inventing itself as a force for economic prosperity has been nothing short of remarkable, with China achieving near double-digit growth rates per annum since the early 1990s. But as the mass demonstrations of 1989 showed, relying

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exclusively on economic performance as the sole basis of regime legitimacy is a very dangerous position to take. As such, the party has also sought to (re)establish itself as the sole representative of China's nationalist interests in the face of a (sometimes) hostile international community (albeit, often only perceived that way).

This over-arching quest for nationalist legitimacy by the CCP is at the very heart of Zheng Wang's new volume *Never Forget National Humiliation*, a must-read for anyone interested in post-Tiananmen Chinese nationalism. Wang convincingly identifies the apparent success with which the CCP has attained the nationalist support of its populace since that fateful day in June 1989, particularly among the young. This includes many of those who have attended elite schools in the United States and Europe and should therefore be able to think outside the conventional CCP ideological straitjacket. How has the CCP managed this? As Wang shows, by exploiting the acute sensitivity still apparent among Chinese people over their country's past humiliations at the hands of foreign imperialist powers. How has the CCP exploited this sensitivity? Quite simply, by reminding people just how bad things once were and (by implication) how "good" things are now (under the CCP).

The first three chapters of Wang's book succeed well in providing background and context to the contemporary use of historical memory by the CCP. A theoretical analysis of historical memory in domestic politics and foreign relations is followed by an overview of the key events that comprise the so-called "century of humiliation" in China, and the different ways in which the late Qing, Republican and Mao regimes constructed a Chinese national identity based on shame and humiliation. Wang then explores the CCP's utilisation of historical memory through the already well-documented Patriotic Education Campaign (beginning in May 1990), during the high-profile Beijing Olympics and throughout the relief effort following the Sichuan earthquake in 2008. After this, Wang appropriately broadens his horizons by looking at the impact of China's now institutionalised historical consciousness on its foreign relations, most notably with Japan and the US. Wang suggests that the unpalatable memory of those terrible years for China often acts as a key motivating factor in international disputes, particularly if the confrontation is seen as an affront to the nation's 'identity, face, and authority' (p. 15). Examples of such confrontations include the US-led NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in May 1999, the mid-air collision in April 2001 between a US intelligence aircraft and a PLA interceptor fighter jet over Hainan island and the continuing unsightly spat with Japan over sovereignty claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Through the strong empirical foundations upon which this book is based Wang succeeds well in illustrating the success with which the CCP has attained the nationalist support of its populace. Wang has taken the time and care to visit China's primary schools, speak with students and read their history textbooks in reaching his conclusions. This consequently sets his book above many others on this subject. The structure of the book is also good. By following a chronological structure and using an accessible writing style Wang enables his book to be read by the expert, the student and indeed the layman.

So what's missing? Quite simply, the other side of the story. At times, Wang presents his findings in a manner that suggests no-one in China actually rejects the CCP's exploitation of historical memory, that everyone in China has simply swallowed the party line. But for a country the size of China and with free(ish) access to the internet, it is clear that is not the case. For example, recent research on the infamous burning of the Old Summer Palace by the British and French in 1860 suggests that the CCP's attempts to use this incident for its own political purposes has backfired quite dramatically. A number of Chinese "netizens" have responded by rejecting the CCP's narrative of events and reminding us that Chinese warlords and Red Guards also played a role in bringing the historical site to its knees. Others have questioned why the CCP is spending more and more money renovating the site instead of directing the money towards China's crumbling hospitals and schools. Most worryingly of all for the authority of the party, some have suggested that China is just as subservient to foreigners now as it was back then. So in this regard, the growth of nationalism in China has very much been a double-edged sword for the CCP.

Other examples of a nationalist "backlash" (if you can call it that), or at least an emerging anti-CCP nationalism, have been apparent in the Chinese scholarly and public debate over the leading role of the Guomindang in defeating Japan during the Second Sino-Japanese War, despite the CCP's erstwhile claims that the CCP won the war. Additionally, the rise of "Republican fever" (*Minguo re*), an increasingly vocal movement which claims that life was a lot better during the Republic than it is under the People's Republic, illustrates further public rejection of the CCP's

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exploitation of historical memory.

Wang's book would have benefited from a more balanced perspective which takes account of these less orthodox trends in Chinese nationalist thinking. Adopting such a perspective would have shown not only that there are different public attitudes towards the CCP on the national question, but also that China is not a single, unified entity as this book perhaps unwittingly implies.

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Robert Weatherley is a lawyer with the UK firm Mills & Reeve and an affiliated lecturer in Chinese politics at Cambridge University. Robert has published work on a number of subjects relating to China including human rights, regime legitimacy and internet nationalism. His fourth book entitled "Making China Strong: The Role of Nationalism in Chinese Thinking on Democracy and Human Rights" is forthcoming.

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