

**Zheng Wang. *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.**

The title of Zheng Wang's book refers to the Chinese phrase *wuwang guochi*, first used in 1915 to condemn Japan's imperialist Twenty-One Demands on the Chinese government. Since then, *guochi*—or national humiliation—has been employed to various degrees in Chinese public discourse by different people and for different political purposes. As William Callahan's fascinating research on this topic has revealed, the government of the Chinese Nationalist Party (GMD) in 1928 published calendars containing no less than 26 "National Humiliation Days" and even made one of these "National Humiliation Days" a public holiday from 1927 onwards.<sup>1</sup> Today, the phrase *wuwang guochi* is displayed in Chinese museums, appears in Chinese school textbooks, and is used as a slogan in Chinese anti-American or anti-Japanese demonstrations. Wang's book, however, is not a historical study of perceived national humiliations of the Chinese at the hands of Western and Japanese imperialists, but an attempt to explain how the myth of "national humiliation" has become China's "chosen trauma," which has informed official Chinese behavior in most major dealings with the rest of the world over the past two decades. This attempt is only partly successful, suffering above all from unsubstantiated generalizations and apologetic celebrations of the leadership and policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Wang's guiding interest and approach are praiseworthy. He rightly draws attention to the lack of general interest in the role collective memory and history politics play in analyses of modern China.<sup>2</sup> To him, "historical memory is the key to understanding Chinese politics and foreign relations" (7). As the main influence on modern historical consciousness in China, Wang identifies the so-called "century of humiliation." By this, he—and the CCP—refer to the time from the First Opium War (1840) to the end of the Second World War in 1945, including China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894/95), the Allied suppression of the Boxer Rebellion (1900), the terms of the Paris Peace Treaty (1919), which—though Wang claims otherwise—the Chinese delegation *never* signed, and the Japanese invasion of China from 1931 onwards. When the CCP was faced with a legitimation crisis after Deng Xiaoping's modernization policies, the breakdown of the Communist bloc in Eastern Europe, and the Tiananmen massacre of 1989, the party sought to fill the ideological void by starting a patriotic education campaign in 1991. The "century of humiliation," never to be forgotten by the Chinese people, became the rhetorical cornerstone of this campaign. According to Wang, former president Jiang Zemin was the driving force behind this "patriotic turn," which initially only targeted young people and students but later became a nationwide mobilization. In fact, the "CCP set the entire propaganda machine in motion for this campaign" (112). As a result, the party created a huge reservoir of nationalistic youth, equipped with an anti-foreign historical consciousness, which the CCP can easily activate to serve its own needs. Wang's case studies of perceived continuing humiliations and the official and popular reactions to them include the Taiwan Straits Crisis (1995-96) over Lee Teng-hui's

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<sup>1</sup> See William Callahan, "History, Identity, and Security: Producing and Consuming Nationalism in China," *Critical Asian Studies* 38:2 (2006), 179-208: 189. See also by the same author "Humiliation, Salvation and Chinese Nationalism," *Alternatives* 29:2 (2004), 199-218 and "The Cartography of National Humiliation and the Emergence of China's Geobody," *Public Culture* 21:1 (2009), 141-73.

<sup>2</sup> A recent addition to this field is *Places of Memory in Modern China – History, Politics, Identity*, ed. Marc A. Matten, Leiden: Brill 2012.

visit to the US, the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by the US air force, and the US-China warplane collision in 2001. These renewed “humiliations” of China serve to validate the official “victim narrative” of the past, which, in the 1990’s, replaced the previous “victor narrative” that had celebrated Communism, class struggle, and Mao’s successes—and omitted his failures. “Education on national humiliation” is promoted by official speeches, newspaper editorials, TV series, school education, and more than 10,000 patriotic education bases all over China (“a forest of monuments”). It aims at keeping alive the memories of historical denigration in order to stimulate pride in China’s ongoing “rejuvenation” and to teach the Chinese people to love their motherland, the party, and socialism (104).

This richness of sources on this topic provides the potential for a profound and thorough study of Chinese history politics. Wang, a native of Kunming in Southwest China and former deputy director of a Beijing-based think-tank, should be given credit for having authored the first monograph on this important subject. There are, however, more than a few problems with Wang’s analysis. To begin with, the relation between the past, historical memory, elite myth-making, and identity is never spelled out.<sup>3</sup> Wang does not clearly distinguish the past from history and memory, nor does he ever discuss the difference between assigned and chosen identities. His treatment of nationalism also relies on a simplistic model that distinguishes nationalism along geographical and cultural lines: “forward-looking and universalistic” American versus “backward-looking and particularistic” Chinese nationalism (25). Readers of this book, unfortunately, are permanently confronted with cultural essentialism (China’s “deep culture,” 11) and simplistic stereotypes: “many in the West tend to...”, “people in the West,” “Westerners,” “the Chinese people,” “the Chinese understanding of history,” “many Chinese enthusiastically believe...,” “the Chinese national character,” and so on. What makes the use of this stereotypical vocabulary worse is that none of these general claims come with any statistical or other proof. What is the academic worth of stereotypical generalizations such as “The American sense of history makes Americans generally insensitive to other people’s historical grievances” (25)? Furthermore, Wang never defines his key vocabulary: what does he mean by “China” and “the Chinese”? Does he mean to imply that there is no significant difference between the historical memory of people in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, Europe, and the Americas? And whose “China” is this? All too often, Wang fails to distinguish between the political leadership, top-down rhetoric, and official propaganda on the one side and the harsh socio-economic reality of hundreds of millions on the other side, who probably care a good deal less about the “century of humiliation” than about safe labor and food, clean water and air.

Wang’s uncritical celebration of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 is a case in point. Euphemistically, he compares the hosting to a “family wedding” (156) and praises the “world-leading count of 51 gold medals, ... splendid opening ceremony, and the construction of expensive sports facilities” (153-154), while there is no mention at all of the human costs of these “successes”: harsh labor conditions, environmental damage, forced migration, doping, questionable training methods, etc. The low point of the book, however, is Wang’s hagiographic portrayal of the party’s reaction to the devastating Sichuan earthquake in 2008. Wang implies that in view of the frequency of natural disasters, Chinese people prefer a strong government to freedom of speech and then praises the “government’s swift and effective response to the

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<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Wang does not seem to be aware of Yinan He’s studies in this field; he makes no mention, for example, of her “Remembering and Forgetting the War: Elite Mythmaking, Mass Reaction, and Sino-Japanese Relations, 1950–2006,” *History & Memory*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2007), 43-74.

Sichuan earthquake” (157). He completely ignores that many “natural” disasters in China have a very strong man-made element. This is not only the case historically, when famines starved millions to death as a result of Mao’s failed economic policies, but also regarding the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. The latter was most likely caused by a massive nearby hydro-electric dam, and the high death tolls were due to the infamous “tofu” construction of many buildings that get construction permits through bribery rather than safety inspections. But Wang insists that “through its humanitarian actions, the CCP brought the people closer to the government” (158). At this point, the reviewer could not help but wonder if he was reading a scholarly work published by a renowned US university press or a propaganda pamphlet from the People’s Press in Beijing. Is it too far-fetched to assume that much of the efficiency of “collectivism” which Wang celebrates in fact results from coercion and the suppression of alternative views and approaches that could prove equally or even more efficient and effective? Wang also celebrates the media coverage of the earthquake, claiming that “newspapers, television, and online media reported events openly” (161), yet he ignores the inconvenient fact of massive and continued censorship. Even on the fifth anniversary of the tragedy this year, the Central Propaganda Department issued censorship requests that demanded “positive coverage.”<sup>4</sup> Would such requests be necessary if the CCP had handled everything as skillfully as Wang suggests?

It is symptomatic of Wang’s biased analysis that those Chinese who criticize the state and party leadership and offer alternative views on the past, the present, and the future of Chinese society, such as the artist Ai Weiwei, Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo, the blind activist Chen Guangcheng, or writer Liao Yiwu, are not mentioned in this study even once.

To be fair, the last chapter of the book, which discusses nationalism in cyberspace and the tensions between nationalism and globalism, works as a partial corrective to the previous chapters. Wang eventually admits that “the master narrative of national history is still based on official statements rather than public consensus” and that party leaders “have always avoided discussing the tremendous failures and catastrophes that have been caused by the party” (242). These concessions, however, do not change the generally apologetic tone of this book. Despite its many problems, this reviewer still recommends this book to any reader interested in the “rise of China,” Chinese history politics, or Chinese nationalism. The value of reading Wang’s book does not lie in its scholarship; nonetheless, as a document that attests to how successful the Chinese nationalism resulting from patriotic education and top-down history politics can be, even among Chinese intellectuals abroad, it speaks volumes.

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/05/ministry-of-truth-anniversary-of-sichuan-quake/> (accessed 29 August 2013)