**Two Facets of National Humiliation in China: Based on the Nanjing Case**

By Runjie Ou, PhD in Politics, New School for Social Research

## Introduction

There is an urban legend that is popular in mainland China nowadays —the Nanjing Campaign (南京战役). The Nanjing Campaign is not about a real military campaign that took place in Nanjing, but rather a tale in which some Japanese international students were allegedly beaten by patriotic Chinese citizens.

The most popular version of the Nanjing Campaign goes like this: Two Japanese international students were speaking negatively about China in a McDonald's in Nanjing. They thought it was safe to do so because they assumed few people in China understood Japanese. However, two Chinese students, who happened to be majoring in Japanese, were passing by. They realized that the two Japanese students were attempting to insult and humiliate China. The patriotic Chinese students soon started a fight with the Japanese students inside the McDonald's, and other Chinese customers, after being informed about the reason for the altercation, soon joined in.

The details of this urban legend vary depending on the emphasis of the storytellers. Some versions stress the fact that the workers at McDonald's turned off the security cameras at the beginning of the fight so they could assist the patriotic students (and later joined the fight themselves). Other versions emphasize the role of the police, who arrived late to the scene, allegedly because they were taking an unnecessary cigarette break or had "lost their way." In most versions, the two patriotic students are from Nanjing University, one of the top universities of China since the last century. The Japanese students are also often said to be from the same university, though in about half of the versions, they are left anonymous[1].

As we can see from this urban legend, the narrative of national humiliation in China consists of two interwoven but distinct elements: memory and imagination. While the content of the humiliation narrative is grounded in specific shared memories, the details within these narratives can be distorted, embellished, or even entirely fabricated. Memory and imagination, these are two facets of Chinese national humiliation narrative that I have found through this summer field trip.

## Literature Review

The earliest record of national humiliation (国耻) in Chinese literatures could be traced back to Confucius' *Book of Rites.* According to Confucius, national humiliation is a capacity of the virtuous king that allows him to discipline himself so that the state could be flourished. A more well-known narrative of national humiliation could be found from the story of a duke at Confucius' times, that is, Gou Jian (勾践)'s *Taste Gall and Sleep on Straw* (卧薪尝胆). In that story, Gou Jian of State *Yue (越)* became an overlord and finished his revenge through enduring humiliation from his enemy, another duke *Fu Chai* who competed for the overlord. Paul Cohen argues that, even though national humiliation in ancient China means the humiliation of a ruling house instead of a nation, Gou Jian's story has become a (and might also the only) consistent political narrative that has kept its meaning from ancient to modern (Cohen 2009, 45). If patience and endurance of humiliation could be considered as a necessary condition for success, then national humiliation is no longer about suffering from shame but could be justified as a test or challenge for all members of the community. As Cohen has put, Chinese people is fascinated by Gou Jian's revenge in early 20th century because the Gou Jian tale just fit the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial challenge faced by Chinese people. And the government would like to utilize the story for its legitimacy and people also would buy the story as they could find some hope for their sufferings and struggles.

---

[1] There are too many things to be analyzed in this urban legend: the brilliant students who came from the best university of the city and had best virtue, those policemen with a sense of justice in terms of standing with the people, and patriotic bystanders who never just stood aside. Even the sight, the McDonald's, as a symbol of American culture, could also has its own symbolic meaning in this story. It is highly possible that the whole story is fake – I consulted with a professors who had been teaching in Nanjing University for over 30 years about this legend, and he denied its authenticity.

Discourse of shame and humiliation that combined with a narrative of nation state could also be found in other countries in global politics. And there is a growing interest among political scientists in investigating such discourse. Through an analysis of state policy responses following a state's defeat, Ayse Zarakol argues that political stigma arising from discourses of humiliation, backwardness, and defeat has played a significant role in the development of national identity in Asia-Pacific countries such as Turkey, Japan, and Russia (Zarakol 2010, 95). Similarly, Catherine Lu has emphasized the importance of the discourse of shame and pride in global politics. As Lu has found, the pursuit of justice in the form of "a punitive settling of accounts compounded the shame of defeat" became instrumental in Hitler's rise to power (Lu 2017, 30). According to Lu, the discourse of national humiliation should be considered as a reflection of structural injustice in international and transnational contexts, and such a kind of structural injustice would prevent the reconciliation for anti-colonial struggles.

The discourse of national humiliation is closely connected with another topic of contemporary Chinese politics – *the Century of Humiliation (百年国耻).* Just like China is not the only country that has its own narrative of national humiliation, China is not the only nation-state to have such a discourse centered around "a century of humiliation"[2]. Generally, in contemporary Chinese politics, "the Century of Humiliation" has been widely used to refer to the struggling of Chinese people against the west colonialists and imperialist powers from 1840s to 1940s. Many scholars from mainland China would like to consider the establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 as marking the end of century of humiliation as well as the first time this notion was mentioned. However, other scholars, like John Fitzgerald, would argue that the first usage of *Century of Shame (百年耻辱)* in contemporary Chinese politics could be found from 1941 Republic China, where it served as an instrument to criticize nationalist Kuomintang Party (Fitzgerald, 2022). Despite the debate over which regime in contemporary Chinese politics first invented the discourse of "century of humiliation," there is broad agreement that century of humiliation should be seen as beginning with the 1840 Opium War between China and Britain. From this perspective, Peter Gries has provided an insightful definition on the notion, as "century" should be considered as not a long period of time but a historical moment in such a discourse, but "a traumatic and foundational moment because it fundamentally challenged Chinese views of the world." (Gries 2005, 47) For this reason, just as people from Israel will never forget the Holocaust, Chinese people today cannot live without the discourse of the "Century of Humiliation," as such a discourse is integral to their sense of modernity.

**Place of Pride and Shame: Office of the President and The Memorial Hall of Nanjing Massacre**

During my field trip, I visited two main sites in Nanjing where traces of the national humiliation narrative can be found. The first site is the Office of the President (总统府), located in the center of Nanjing, which has served as the office of the local government since the Qing Dynasty. Nanjing has experienced several regime changes in the last century, including peasant revolutions, the republican revolution, the Japanese invasion, and the socialist revolution, all of which had their traces in this city. As its name suggests, Nanjing was once the capital of China. Strategically located in the heart of the Yangtze River Delta, it benefits from highly developed transportation networks due to its geographical location and an abundance of agricultural products. The Office of the President is situated at the heart of the Nanjing city.

It takes only a twenty-minute drive to travel from the Office of the President to the Memorial Hall of the Nanjing Massacre. The memorial hall was built in 1985 and originally consisted of a single museum hall to preserve and display collections related to the massacre that occurred in 1937. Following the establishment of the National Memorial Day of the Nanjing Massacre on December

---

[2] India has its "century of humiliation" among mid-18th century to 1947; Iran has a similar narrative which is commonly linked to Qajar era (19th to 20th century), during which the country lost lands from the influence of Russian and British Empires; Turkey narrates its "century of humiliation" with the fall of Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century; Egypt's "century of humiliation" typically refers to the period from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, starting with British occupation in 1882 and ending with the Free Officers Movement's revolution in 1952. Besides, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand and many other countries in East Asia also have similar narratives of "century of humiliation" like China does.

13th as a national memorial day in 2014, the Memorial Hall of the Nanjing Massacre has become one of the most important public museums in Nanjing, having undergone three renovations and expansions since 1985.

The Office of the President and the Memorial Hall are two must-visit sites for visitors to Nanjing, especially for native Chinese visitors. The Office of the President is a place of pride: it has witnessed Nanjing's transformation into a modern city while maintaining the continuity of a centralized government. The entire site is divided into three sections to showcase three consecutive ruling regimes in Nanjing: the Qing Dynasty, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, and the Republic of China. In contrast, the Memorial Hall of the Nanjing Massacre is a museum of shame and sorrow. Paintings, modern sculptures, and preserved bones and relics from the massacre are the main items on display. The design of the visiting route creates a somber atmosphere: visitors must descend a long hall into the ground before reaching the main exhibition hall. White chrysanthemums, which are traditionally offered to the deceased in Chinese culture, are provided at the entrance. Holding these flowers makes visiting the museum feel more like a solemn ceremony rather than a tour driven by curiosity.

By comparing the experience of visiting the Office of the President and the Memorial Hall, we can see the dialectical tensions between these two places. The Office of the President attempts to simplify the long history of 19th- and 20th-century China into a series of historical moments. By doing so, it reveals to visitors the so-called "cycle of order and chaos": from a feudal regime to a peasant-led religious government, from the pioneering Chinese republicans to the eventual failure of the Kuomintang government. The history of China's modernization is presented in such a way that the advanced ultimately overcomes the backward, and the righteous regime eventually replaces the corrupt one. The most significant aspect of the narrative constructed by the museum's setup is that the current Chinese government serves as the storyteller, interpreting history from its own perspective. It is portrayed as the best of all past regimes and the most civilized one in history. The Office of the President serves as a place of disenchantment: no myths of former power could be found here and all passing regimes and governments are examined through the lens of historical materialism.

While the Office of the President is intended to simplify a long history into several historical sections, the Memorial Hall serves as a place to extend one important historical moment into the broader context of 20th-century Chinese history. As a museum of the Holocaust, the exhibition is heavily based on individual memories. However, these atomized memories have been organized, combined, and reiterated in this space. The suffering of individuals during the massacre is transformed into the suffering of the nation. When the sorrow and agony are framed not just as the experience of a single person but of the entire nation, the exhibition of this tragic history becomes a site of contemplation and reflection for the state. As seen in the setup of the Memorial Hall, half of the exhibitions are not focused solely on how the massacre occurred in 1937, but also on the historical context of when the tragedy began and how the anti-fascist struggle ultimately concluded. Even though the notion "century of humiliation" is not directly mentioned by the exhibition of the memorial hall, the whole museum and the entire visiting experience is about the content of it.

**Three Formulas of National Humiliation Discourse: Reconciliation, Forgetting, and Sacralization**

Humiliation education has been an important part of public education in contemporary Chinese politics. During the time of the Republic of China, the government designated over twenty memorial days in the name of national humiliation (Xiong, 2013). These memorial days served not only as a narrative of victimhood but also as a component of state ritual. As Guo Hui has pointed out, the reason there were so many national humiliation memorial days in 20th-century China is that by regularly holding state-level memorial events, the legitimacy of state leadership could be reinforced among the people (Guo, 2012). However, in the 21st century, a narrative of victimhood no longer serves as the most effective way to bolster state leadership. The reason for this is simple: in peaceful times, when history is "concluded" by the current government, a narrative of humiliation as a story of victimhood does not align well with a narrative of victory,

especially considering the fact that China was one of the victorious countries of the WWII.

More specifically, the discourse of national humiliation was born alongside a discourse of the decline of the state (Li, 2017). Emphasizing the discourse of national humiliation during peaceful times could indeed stir patriotic passion among the people, but it could also provoke uncertainties by bringing those traumatic memories to the forefront. For this reason, no matter in Office of President or Memorial Hall of Nanjing Massacre, the narrative of national humiliation is deliberated through a formula of *reconciliation* instead of a discourse of revenge, which could be found from the story of Gou Jian.

There are six large paintings hanging in the hall of the Office of the President. Together with the other exhibitions at the site, they illustrate different aspects of the discourse of national humiliation, each corresponding to a specific period in history, which can be summarized as follows:

| | Humiliation Narrative | Meaning |
|---|---|---|
| 1853-1870 | Taiping Rebellion against Qing regime | The people have the right to rebel against the government that brought dishonor to the nation |
| 1870-1911 | Xin Hai Revolution - End of humiliation | Failure is backward; Republican government works better than feudal government in redemption of national humiliation but people still suffered. |
| 1911-1937 | Not mentioned | |
| 1937-1947 | Not mentioned | |
| 1947-1949 | KMT government was replaced by the CCP government | The history of humiliation was terminated by the most advanced regime |

While the Office of the President emphasizes the history of the Taiping Rebellion, the late Qing regime, and the Republic of China, the period from 1911 to 1947 is intentionally overlooked. What is noteworthy when comparing the Office of the President with the Memorial Hall is that while the history since 1937 is memorialized in one place, it is forgotten in the other. Nanjing was once the capital of the Republic of China, and the Office of the President was occupied by the Japanese and their puppet state during this time. If anything can be considered a true humiliation for the nation, then the history of the occupation of the Office of the President must certainly be on that list.

A possible explanation for this phenomenon is that the historical injustice committed by the Japanese invaders cannot easily be reconciled in the context of the Office of the President. Unlike the case of the Nanjing Massacre, where the people were victims and the perpetrators were clearly identifiable, the situation with the Office of the President is more complicated: in this case, both the state and the nation were victims and, in a sense, perpetrators. This might only be reconciled if a similar conquest were to occur in Japan—such as China becoming the invader and occupying Tokyo or another politically significant city.

Another possible explanation concerns the historical complexity involved. The consistency of the discourse of national humiliation in contemporary Chinese politics is based on the admiration of a memory of modernization. When a backward regime is replaced by a more advanced one, the former sufferings associated with national humiliation are seen as being resolved. This is why both the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China have claimed to be the terminators of the history of humiliation. However, conflicts between China and foreign countries can also be interpreted through this formula. A historical fact that is not mentioned in the exhibitions at the Office of the President is that the puppet government during the Japanese occupation promoted a similar narrative of national humiliation: the Japanese invasion was portrayed as a necessary condition for redeeming the shame and suffering imposed on all Asians by the West. Then we can see a hidden formula of the discourse of national humiliation: *the formula of forgetting*. More specifically, the humiliation discourse that could be found from the Office of President was not actually based on the historical fact by an imagination of history which omitted the role of

Japanese occupation.

Another aspect of the national humiliation discourse in the Chinese context is that it is highly "sacralized." By saying sacralization I mean the discourse of national humiliation seems to be extensively political, but it has effects on people through a depoliticized way. Barbara Misztal has observed a rising interest in Europe in the form of growing sites of reverence related to tourism and heritage movements. Through this process, Misztal argues that a new type of memorial construction has replaced former national and religious memories. This form of memory construction is considered sacralized in the sense that it gives rise to a new "spirituality of seeking" (Misztal, 2004). For Misztal, memorial events and sites take on a role similar to that of religion: they guide people on where the soul should go. By celebrating and commemorating historical moments, people are, in effect, reintroducing the concept of the soul into the public sphere and projecting history into the future, much like our ancestors did. Just as the discourse of the Holocaust is connected with a messianic moment in Jewish thought—invoking themes of suffering, redemption, and the quest for a promised future—the discourse of national humiliation in contemporary China also seeks something spiritual rather than merely political. Evidence of the sacralization of the national humiliation discourse can be found in the Republic of China era, when it often called for individuals to "sacrifice one's life for the country." In the modern context, it calls for "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." It could even be traced back to ancient times, revealing the imagination of intellectuals about what a good king is supposed to be and the difficult choices faced by those in power—to die with honor or live with shame. In short, the greatest consistency of a discourse of national humiliation in contemporary Chinese politics would be found in its formula of sacralization.

**"Nanjing Campaign" Revisited**

Let's return to the urban tale of the Nanjing Campaign mentioned earlier. The discourse of national humiliation consists of both memory and imagination. While memories can be selective and imagination may be constructed on fragile foundations, a discourse of humiliation is not always about objective facts but rather a form of public expression. So, what can we uncover if we apply the three formulas of national humiliation discourse to the case of the Nanjing Campaign? There is no doubt that this urban tale is still based on some historical facts. For example, students from Nanjing University have always been among the most passionate and patriotic when it comes to events related to a humiliation discourse.[3]

However, the possibility for reconciliation can also be discerned in the narrative of this urban tale. While stories told by those opposed to the Japanese are often filled with blood and death, the urban tale about a fight at McDonald's presents a conflict more akin to a daily matter between neighbors. Even in the most extreme versions of the story, no one died, and the extent of the injuries suffered by the two Japanese students is often left unspecified. Some degree of reconciliation can be perceived here: the fight involves students, not soldiers, and the "symbolic participation" of other citizens and policemen does not lead to any disastrous outcome. It is safe to say that even though many Chinese people still harbor hostility toward the Japanese, a certain level of reconciliation is noticeable through the highly entertaining retelling of this story.

What remains uncertain are the spiritual or depoliticized implications of spreading an urban tale like this on the internet. In the last century, the discourse of national humiliation was widely used to construct an imagined vision of a powerful and modernized China—a state where people would

---

[3] One of the most famous patriotic strikes happened in last century for memorizing May 9th National Humiliation Day was led by students from Nanjing Higher Normal School, the school which later became the Nanjing University. The story is still admired by the current Nanjing local government as you can find it from the governmental website: https://dsb.nanjing.gov.cn/xxcb/wsh/201405/t20140507_2085765.html. Another urban tale I have heard during the field trip about how passionate students from Nanjing University is, due to students at Nanjing University are "too passionate," current government tends to see them as trouble makers and favored another comparatively mediocre university. And when Xi Jingping came to Nanjing and had the celebration of Nanjing Massacre, Nanjing University was not invited as the representative of Nanjing college students.

no longer suffer from foreign aggression or bullying. But what are people seeking when they narrate a similar story in contemporary China? A notable shift in the narrative of the Nanjing Campaign is that it is no longer told from the perspective of victims but from that of the perpetrators: a group attacking two young foreigners is justified because they were Japanese and allegedly made offensive remarks against China. A group of Chinese fighting against two Japanese cannot be considered a fair fight, even if it takes place in an American fast food restaurant—a location that holds special symbolic meaning as “fighting in the place of the barbarian.”

The Nanjing Campaign tale began to gain popularity in 2023, just after the end of the pandemic, and has been widely circulated on platforms like TikTok, WeChat, Kuaishou, and many others that provide content to the general public. Despite the fact that contemporary China still adheres to the formal discourse of national humiliation, the tacit acceptance of spreading urban tales like the Nanjing Campaign suggests another possibility: we are witnessing a transformation in the discourse of national humiliation. A discourse that was once intended to seek justice and equality on many levels is now turning into its opposite.

**References**


Cohen, P. A. (2009). *Speaking to history: the story of King Goujian in twentieth-century China* (Vol. 16). Univ of California Press.

Fitzgerald, J. (2022). The Harder They Fall: Australia–China Relations in Xi Jinping's New Era. In *Australia on the World Stage* (pp. 123-140). Routledge.

Li, Fan. (2017). A brief discussion on “National Humiliation” and “Diminish of the Nation” discourses from historical textbooks of late Qing and early Republic of China. *Ren Wen Za Zhi,* Vol.2 2017. (李帆，浅析清末民初历史教科书中的‘国耻’与‘亡国’话语. 人文杂志，2017年第2期.)

Lu, C. (2017). *Justice and reconciliation in world politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Misztal, B. A. (2004). The sacralization of memory. *European journal of social theory*, *7*(1), 67-84.

Zarakol, A. (2010). *After defeat: How the East learned to live with the West* (Vol. 118). Cambridge University Press.

Xiong, Bing. (2013). The memory of humiliation and confidence of the nation: a discussion on memorials of national humiliation in the Republic of China. *Social Science of GanSu,* Vol.1 2013. (熊斌，国耻记忆与民族自信：民国时期国耻纪念论述. 甘肃社会科学，2013年第1期.)

Guo, Hui. (2012). A study on national ceremony of the Republic of China. PhD Thesis of Central China University May 2012. (郭辉，民国国家仪式研究. 华中师范大学2012年5月，博士论文).