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'The Backward Will Be Beaten': Historical Lesson, Security, and Nationalism in China

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ABSTRACT

What has China learned from the 'Century of Humiliation'? In China's mnemonic practices, 'the backward will be beaten,' which attributes the nation's humiliation experiences to economic, military, and technological backwardness, is the most significant 'lesson from past' required to be remembered. Bridging the literatures on memory, nationalism, and International Relations (IR), this study conducts a detailed analysis of the making of 'the backward will be beaten' and examines how it helps shape China's perception of national security based on a competitive worldview and its associated nationalist visions. This study also identifies alternative discourses that challenge the dominant historical lesson by intellectuals and netizens. It contributes to a nuanced understanding of the collective memory of the Century of Humiliation and its implications for Chinese nationalism and foreign relations.

Introduction

There are many studies on China's 'Century of Humiliation' as a mnemonic construction and how it shapes Chinese nationalism. The Century of Humiliation, constructed as a long process of striving for national survival and independence from Western and Japanese imperialism, provides rich resources for officialdom, intellectuals, media, and other agents to generalize historical lessons that may be significant for the present. In Chinese political and public discourses, different types of lessons of the Century of Humiliation have been discussed and disputed. Among them, the most significant lesson should be the very famous saying, 'the backward will be beaten,' (落后就要挨打) which attributes the national humiliation to China's economic, military, and technological backwardness vis-à-vis foreign powers. This dictum has become almost taken-for-granted as a piece of historical knowledge and a mythic representation of the past in China. Given its central position in the remembering of the Century of Humiliation, how 'the backward will be beaten' is interpreted and used in Chinese official, academic, and popular texts is particularly significant for our understanding of how the past is related to the present in the Chinese context.

Some scholars have discussed 'the backward will be beaten' when analyzing the Century of Humiliation.¹ Yet it remains unclear how the lesson is made and remade in China's official discourse, how it is used to serve the present, and how it is contested in society. Bridging the literatures on memory, nationalism, and International Relations (IR), this study conducts a detailed analysis of the making of 'the backward will be beaten.' It traces the historical

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¹William A Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2004); Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

origins of ‘the backward will be beaten’, its changing interpretations, and its institutionalization, and then examines how it helps shape China’s perception of national security based on a competitive worldview and its associated nationalist visions. In addition, this study also identifies alternative discourses that challenge the dominant historical lesson by intellectuals and netizens. The micro-analysis of the historical lesson can function as a window to examine China’s broader discourse on history, identity, and security.

Collective Memory and Historical Lessons: Using the Past to Inform the Present

The interconnection between the past and the present lies at the center of memory studies. Collective memory, in Halbwachs’ tradition, is a selective remembering of the past, intersubjectively shared by social groups. A collective memory is not an objective reflection of the past, but a social construct, often made by political and cultural elites, in light of present values and needs. Furthermore, when a collective memory is created and stabilized, it functions to guide and inform the present, usually by shaping a collective identity.² Collective memory is both ‘a model of society,’ as ‘an expressing symbol,’ and ‘a model for society,’ as ‘an orienting symbol.’³ Additionally, collective memory is not a static product, but under reconstruction, change, and contestation over time. As Foucault famously argues, ‘Since memory is actually a very important factor in struggle ... if one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism.’⁴ Both the center and periphery of a society can participate in memory contestation and claim their favored ‘historical truth.’

A historical lesson or a ‘lesson from the past’ is the key component of a traumatic or guilty memory. It is the most normative and prescriptive expression of such a memory (e.g. ‘never again war’ in German memory) and the most convenient indicator that can be used to find a ‘correct’ present and avoid similar mistakes in history. From an instrumentalist perspective, a traumatic or guilty past is usually framed as a deviant part of ‘our history’ (e.g. a peace-loving nation fighting a wrong war), so an appropriate lesson can be used to prevent the historical deviance happening again and to legitimize the present order as a correct choice (e.g. maintaining peace as we did in the past except when involved in the wrong war). In some mnemonic sites such as films, historical lessons tend to be implicitly told, but in other sites such as education and political speeches, memory claimers often explicitly articulate historical lessons as normative suggestions or even as dictations audiences are supposed to remember.

Most scholarship examining historical lessons⁵ focuses on historical analogy and decision-making.⁶ In particular, IR scholars interrogate how the lessons of Munich (favored military intervention) and Vietnam (against military intervention) influence decision-making in American foreign policy.⁷ Policy-makers may genuinely believe in the lessons they learn from

²Duncan Bell, ‘Introduction,’ in Duncan Bell, ed., *Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections on the Relationship Between Past and Present* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1–29; Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, ‘Social memory studies: from “collective memory” to the historical sociology of mnemonic practices,’ *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, (1998), pp. 105–140.

³Barry Schwartz, ‘Memory as a cultural system: Abraham Lincoln in World War Two,’ *American Sociological Review* 61, (1996), p. 910. *Italic original.*

⁴Michel Foucault, ‘Film and popular memory,’ *Edinburgh Magazine* 2, (1977), p. 22.

⁵Scholars may not explicitly use the phrase ‘historical lesson’ or ‘lesson from the past,’ but when discussing past mistakes, guilt and regret, and self-reflections, the concept of a ‘historical lesson’ is usually implicitly used in the literature.

⁶Andrew J. Taylor and John T. Rourke, ‘Historical analogies in the congressional foreign policy process,’ *The Journal of Politics* 57(2), (1995), pp. 460–468; David H. Noon, ‘Operation enduring analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the uses of historical memory,’ *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7(3), (2004), pp. 339–364; Ernest R. May, *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Jan Angstrom, ‘Mapping the competing historical analogies of the War on Terrorism: the Bush presidency,’ *International Relations* 25(2), (2011), pp. 224–242; Jeffrey Record, ‘The use and abuse of history: Munich, Vietnam and Iraq,’ *Survival* 49(1), (2007), pp. 163–180; Roland Paris, ‘Kosovo and the metaphor war,’ *Political Science Quarterly* 117(3), (2002), pp. 423–450; Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁷When analyzing policy-makers’ understanding of the past events, scholars tend to adopt a more individualist perspective, so the concept of collective memory, built on inter-subjectivity, is often not used.

the past, or strategically and rhetorically use history to help persuade others and advance their policy preferences.⁸ Another branch of scholarship in IR adopts a constructivist or culturalist perspective and focuses on the role of collective memory by analyzing how guilty and reflective memory helps shape a national culture and identity.⁹ This area of scholarship is particularly inspired by and interested in the cases of Germany and Japan, two defeated powers whose foreign policies, including self-constraint on the use of force, are largely shaped by their collective memories (including their learning of the past lessons) and memory-based identities and culture, such as Germany's 'culture of contrition.'

This article adopts such a constructivist/culturalist perspective to analyze the historical lesson of 'the backward will be beaten' and Chinese nationalism, which is said to have a profound impact on China's foreign relations. Nationalism is an ideology of national identity and a particular political culture, shaping an imagined Self in relations with Other. Chinese nationalism is a complex field containing different branches,¹⁰ but in general, both the official nationalism and some types of bottom-up popular nationalism are characterized by a feeling of insecurity toward the outside world.¹¹ That is to say, Chinese nationalism is intertwined with concerns over national security from threatening Others, although China lives in a relatively benign international environment after the Cold War. Such a kind of nationalism is fundamentally based on a competitive worldview and consistent 'production of danger' (e.g. Western powers conspire to besiege China). And scholars have pointed out that such a character of nationalism and its associated worldview are rooted in Chinese memories of past war and conflict, particularly the Century of Humiliation.¹² 'The backward will be beaten,' as the crystallization of the lessons of the Century of Humiliation, could play a significant role in shaping and sustaining China's security-based nationalism.

This study frames the construction of historical lessons as discursive practices. Due to the lack of access to the records pertaining to specific policy-making processes in China, it is almost impossible to know the extent to which Chinese elites genuinely believe claimed historical lessons and how policies are influenced by such lessons. Yet discourse is accessible and observable and thus can be used as a partial reflection of elite (and also public) opinions. Furthermore, the discourse of backward-beaten is produced not only by the officialdom but also by educational, media, and academic practitioners, thereby co-creating a hegemonic vision of the past and present. The discursive practices are by no means sufficient to explain political actions, but they constitute a social reality of security and foreign relations and an ideological context that both elites and the public are located in and thus could enable and constrain certain policies.

So, the goal of this article is more modest: to map the discursive construction of the historical lesson of the Century of Humiliation—both its process and representation—and its implications for China's security-based nationalism. To reach the goal, this study is designed in the following ways. First, since 'the backward will be beaten' is a very abstract expression of the knowledge about the past and its meaning is open to interpretation, the analysis locates the lesson in its associated

⁸Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *Causes of War* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 147.

⁹Ruth Wittlinger and Martin Larose, 'No future for Germany's past? Collective Memory and German foreign policy', *German Politics* 16(4), (2007), pp. 481–495; Thomas U. Berger, 'From sword to chrysanthemum: Japan's culture of anti-militarism', *International Security* 17(4), (1993), pp. 119–150; Thomas U. Berger, 'The past in the present: historical memory and German national security policy', *German Politics* 6(1), (1997), pp. 39–59.

¹⁰James Leibold, 'More than a category: Han supremacism on the Chinese Internet', *The China Quarterly* 203, (2010), pp. 539–559; Jean-Pierre Cabestan, 'The many facets of Chinese nationalism', *China Perspectives* 59, (2005), pp. 1–20; Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004).

¹¹Cabestan, 'The many facets of Chinese nationalism'; Callahan, *The Pessoptimist Nation*; Gries, *China's New Nationalism*; Suisheng Zhao, 'Chinese nationalism and its international orientations', *Political Science Quarterly* 115(1), (2000), pp. 1–33; Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*.

¹²Alisa Adcock Kaufman, 'The "Century of Humiliation," then and now: Chinese perceptions of the international order', *Pacific Focus: Inha Journal of International Studies* 25(1), (2010), pp. 1–33; Cong Riyun, 当代中国民族主义的兴起 [The rise of nationalism in contemporary China], *Aisixiang*, May 18, 2009, accessed January 11, 2020, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/27307.html>; Michael D. Swaine, 'China: the influence of history: how does history influence Chinese thought and behavior today?' *The Diplomat*, January 14, 2015, accessed January 11, 2020, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/china-the-influence-of-history/>; Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*; Yong Deng, 'The Chinese conception of national interests in international relations', *The China Quarterly* 154, (1998), pp. 308–329.

discourses (such as security and foreign policy discourse) and broader webs of meaning. Second, as previously mentioned, memory, including historical lessons, is under dynamic reconstruction, so it is vital to trace the changing interpretations of ‘the backward will be beaten’ in different historical contexts. Third, although ‘the backward will be beaten’ has become a hegemonic discourse in contemporary China, there are alternative and oppositional discourses at the societal level. For example, what does ‘backward’ mean and what made modern China backward? The complex and multifaceted dimension of mnemonic and discursive practices will be addressed in the article.

Data

The official texts were mainly collected from the online database of the *People’s Daily*, the major official newspaper in China, by searching for keywords such as ‘the backward will be beaten’ (落后就要挨打, 落后者是要挨打的) or ‘backward beaten’ (落后挨打). The time span of the textual selection ranges from the 1950s to the present. This article also used Baidu xueshu (百度学术), the Chinese Google scholar, to collect data from relevant academic texts. Additionally, the author searched in Baidu and major Chinese online forums to collect the data of relevant online posts, which are used as the public discussion of ‘the backward will be beaten.’

The Invention of ‘The Backward Will Be Beaten’

‘The backward will be beaten’ originated from a speech Stalin delivered to Soviet industrial managers in 1931,¹³ addressing the people who criticized the pace of industrialization:

It is sometimes asked whether it is not possible to slow down the tempo somewhat, to put a check on the movement ... To slacken the tempo would mean falling behind. And those who fall behind get beaten ... Such is the law of the exploiters—to beat the backward and the weak. It is the jungle law of capitalism. You are backward, you are weak—therefore you are wrong; hence, you can be beaten and enslaved. You are mighty—therefore you are right; hence, we must be wary of you. That is why we must no longer lag behind.¹⁴

This speech was translated and published in the *People’s Daily* in 1953.¹⁵ Such views of capitalist competition and the survival of the Soviet state could readily resonate in China. The ‘backward-beaten’ began to be re-contextualized in China as the lesson from pre-1949 Chinese history and the alert for national security when facing the brutal capitalist Other. Accordingly, the Self had to build strength to defend itself from the external threats of the materially powerful capitalist states. In 1963, when reflecting on the foreign invasion, military defeats, and humiliation in modern Chinese history, Mao Zedong attributed them to the corruption of social institutions and economic and technological backwardness, and urged a fundamental change of the economically and technologically backward status to avoid to be beaten.¹⁶

However, according to the *People’s Daily* database, ‘the backward will be beaten’ (translated as ‘落后者是要挨打的’ or ‘落后就要挨打’)¹⁷ was not often used in the Maoist era. One might argue that this was because of the dominance of the victorious and optimistic discourse of the domestic socialist building, which was said to make China more advanced and even superior; therefore, the discourse of ‘backwardness’ was partly abandoned when speaking of socialist China. In addition to the optimistic vision, Maoism is characterized by its voluntarist belief, which stresses human will rather than material

¹³An Zhili, ‘落后就要挨打’的‘版权’属于谁? [The ‘copyright’ of ‘the backward will be beaten’ belongs to whom?] 文史博览 *Culture and History Vision* 10, (2014), p. 40.

¹⁴Martin McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 110.

¹⁵Stalin, 论经济工作人员的任务 [On economic workers’ tasks], *People’s Daily*, (January 13, 1953).

¹⁶Mao Zedong, 把我国建设成为社会主义的现代化强国 [Building China into a socialist modern power], *Zhongguo wang*, 1963, accessed January 11, 2020, http://www.china.com.cn/cpc/2011-04/15/content_22370717.htm.

¹⁷The original Chinese translation of Stalin’s words is ‘落后者是要挨打的’. The first use of the Chinese phrase ‘落后就要挨打’ in the *People’s Daily* was another translated article of a Soviet politician’s speech. See *People’s Daily*, 尼·亚·布尔加宁同志的演说 [Nikolai Bulganin’s speech] (March 12, 1954). This was the only use of ‘落后就要挨打’ until 1977. In the Maoist era, ‘落后者是要挨打的’ appeared slightly more often than ‘落后就要挨打’.

forces, constituting a mythic image of powerful proletariats. For example, in *On Protracted War* (论持久战) written in wartime, Mao defied the theory of weapon determinism (唯武器论), which prioritizes the military and economic power in war:

Weapons are an important factor in war, but not the decisive factor; it is people, not things, that are decisive. The contest of strength is not only a contest of military and economic power, but also a contest of human power and morale.¹⁸

Such revolutionary discourse was integrated into the official historiography, exemplified in history textbooks and other prominent history works during the Maoist era: the humiliation history was attributed, in particular, to the surrender and lack of resistance of the Qing court and the Nationalist Party (GMD), rather than to the backwardness of their weapons. The belief in voluntarism and the progressiveness of socialism and communism shaped revolutionary romanticism that despised the imperialistic enemies, at least in the discursive field. The Other was more materially powerful but the Self was more politically and morally superior. The domestic and international reactionary forces, no matter how advanced their material power was, were regarded as the 'paper tigers.' So, the backward will not necessarily be beaten, and materially weak states can win against powerful ones.

Certainly, it does not mean that Maoist China ignored the building of hard power. Revolutionary romanticism and material power-based realism were paradoxically mixed in Chinese domestic and foreign policies in the Maoist era. Yet, it seems that revolutionary romanticism was more often used in political rhetoric, if not in real policies.

'The Backward Will Be Beaten' and the Reform and Opening Up

'The backward will be beaten' started to re-emerge and popularize in official discourse after the Cultural Revolution. In fact, it was initially used to rebut the 'Leftist' thought of the Gang of Four and legitimize the new modernization policies, including importing foreign technology and equipment. 'Backwardness' returned to official discourse, and the 'backward-beaten' was included in the political rhetoric of the urgent need to catch up with the developed world.¹⁹ It is worthy of noting that the political discourse at this time was imbued with criticism of the 'reactionary' policies of the Gang of Four, which were regarded as disruptive to China's development and widened the technological and economic gap with the capitalist world. In 1977, the *People's Daily* published an article criticizing the rejection of importing foreign advanced technologies by the Gang of Four:

To buy time is to win. The backward will be beaten. We must seize the current favorable opportunities and adopt various methods, including learning from the strengths of all countries, to buy time and strengthen ourselves. The Gang of Four madly destroyed and attacked the importation [of advanced technology and equipment], which exposed their reactionary nature and vicious motives.²⁰

The anxiety over national security was a major motivation for the modernization policies. Hua Guofeng quoted Mao's speech on modern Chinese history in 1963 to emphasize the urgency of developing economic and military power for national defense, especially from the threat of the Soviet Union.²¹ One article originally published in the *PLA Daily*, the official military newspaper, called for the modernization of science and technology for national defense: 'If we are slow, we will be passive. The backward will be beaten.'²² Diluting revolutionary romanticism, material military power was stressed:

¹⁸Mao Zedong, 'On protracted war', *Marxist Internet Archive*, 1938, accessed January 11, 2020, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_09.htm.

¹⁹*People's Daily*, 中共中央关于召开全国科学大会的通知 [Notice of the Central Committee of the CCP on the convening of the National Scientific Congress] (September 23, 1977).

²⁰轻工业部第二设计院批判组 The Critical Group of the Second Designing Institute of the Light Industry Department, 斥'四人帮'在引进问题上的谬论 [Rebut the Gang of Four's fallacy on importation], *People's Daily*, (July 3, 1977).

²¹Hua Guofeng, 团结起来, 为建设社会主义的现代化强国而奋斗 [Unite and strive to build a modern socialist power], *People's Daily*, (March 7, 1978).

²²*People's Daily*, 向国防科学技术现代化进军 [Advance toward the modernization of national defense science and technology] (September 25, 1977).

Yes, we are Marxists. We insist on using revolutionization (革命化) to command modernization. We emphasize the human factor (人的因素) in determining victory or defeat in war. But it does not mean that the role of weapons and equipment can be ignored. The future war will be a modernized war. We face the enemies armed with modernized weapons. In building our army, we must focus on combining *revolutionized people* with *modernized weapons* in order to give full play to our army's more active role in the future anti-aggression war and trade for great victories with the least price.²³

At this time, 'the backward will be beaten' was mainly used for speaking of the present, without articulating its links to the past. Later, history appeared in the relevant texts. The official media started to use 'the backward will be beaten' in the context of learning from Chinese modern history to justify the reform and opening up. For example, a *People's Daily* article titled 'The historical lesson of closing the door to the outside world' published in 1979 discussed the lesson from the past:

In the early period of contacting foreign capitalism, the Qing rulers forbade and restricted communication between the Chinese people and the rest of the world, and made the Chinese people close-minded and unable to learn from advanced countries. The already backward China thus became more backward. The backward will be beaten. This is the brutal historical fact ... Now the Party Central Committee is leading the people to begin to march toward the Four Modernizations. On the new journey, the residual thought of being closed and arrogant could still be a stumbling block to our progress. Therefore, it is very necessary to revisit this period of history more than 100 years ago [and] to learn the lessons²⁴

Hence, to address the key question of why China became backward in the nineteenth century compared to the Western and Japanese powers, the new interpretation was because of the closed-door policy of the Qing court—a critical change of China's historical writing. Such a point of view was also expressed by Deng Xiaoping in 1984:

Reviewing our history, we have concluded that one of the most important reasons for China's long years of stagnation and backwardness was its policy of closing the country to outside contact. Our experience shows that China cannot rebuild itself behind closed doors and that it cannot develop in isolation from the rest of the world.²⁵

Deng again used the 'backward-beaten' dictum in his 1992 Southern Tour: 'We have been backward for several thousand years, and we cannot maintain [such a status]. The backward will be beaten.'²⁶ So, China needed to open the door and learn from the advanced world to avoid the historical mistake.

The popularization of 'the backward will be beaten' represented the new national strategy and policy of the catch-up economic, technological, and military development through integrating with the advanced capitalist world. The popularity of 'the backward will be beaten' was also a reflection of the fact that the Chinese government realized and openly admitted the backwardness of China in the wake of opening up. As one article in the *People's Daily* stated:

After waking up from the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese people opened the door of the country and suddenly found that 'the outside world is really wonderful.' A feeling of loss, crisis, and struggle pressed on the Chinese nation. 'The backward will be beaten' became a warning in the 1980s.²⁷

The adaption of the meaning of 'the backward will be beaten' was a part of the renewal and alternation of China's official historiography to cope with the changing ideological, political, and economic reality. The legitimation of the modernization discourse in state ideologies and policies, including the introduction of Western economic and technological models, made substantial impacts on the interpretation of history. In China's history textbooks published

²³ibid. Italic added.

²⁴Dai Yi, 闭关政策的历史教训 [The historical lesson of the closing door policy], *People's Daily*, (March 13, 1979).

²⁵Deng Xiaoping, 'Our magnificent goal and basic policies,' *The Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, 1984, accessed January 11, 2020, <https://dengxiaopingworks.wordpress.com/2013/03/18/our-magnificent-goal-and-basic-policies/>.

²⁶Guang'an Daily, 一个战略性的举动-回忆邓小平1992年南方之行 [A strategic move: recall Deng Xiaoping's South Tour in 1992], *Renmin wang*, October 26, 2016, accessed January 11, 2020, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1026/c69113-28809599.html>.

²⁷Chen Zhao and Miao Lu, 圣火之歌 [The song of the sacred flame], *People's Daily*, (September 21, 1990).

since 1978, the narratives of China's modernization process during the Century of Humiliation, including learning from the outside world, have gradually increased, whereas class struggle has been to some extent downplayed. From this perspective, the official memory shows its recognition of Western economic and technological advantages and gives, to some extent, a positive evaluation of Western modernity. So, the West and Japan have shifted from the inferior Others, in terms of class struggle ideology (e.g. reactionary bourgeois), to the superior Others (e.g. advanced, rich, powerful) in the new historical context. China's national identity has changed from the proletariat nation opposing the bourgeois-based foreign imperialism to a developing socialist nation which needs to co-exist with and learn from, albeit containing distrust and conflicts, the advanced capitalist world. Chinese nationalism has also transformed from a revolutionary and romantic nationalism to a kind of 'pragmatic nationalism,' which 'asserts China's national interest by both reacting to and absorbing from the outside world.'²⁸

'The Backward Will Be Beaten' and Memory Politics

The partial recognition of the Other certainly does not mean the official memory has ignored the past bitterness.²⁹ By contrast, to rescue the state legitimacy and promote nationalism, memory politics rose to a higher position in China's ideological practices during the reform era, and such efforts to centralize memory and nationalism became particularly intensive after 1989, with the initiation of the patriotic education campaign. Use of 'the backward will be beaten' emerged to serve the 'memory boom,' and its meaning came to contain more nationalist elements. And more importantly, it was the rise of memory and nationalist politics that institutionalized the use of 'the backward will be beaten' and turned it into widely socialized knowledge in Chinese society.

The institutionalized production of 'the backward will be beaten' is mainly located in historical commemorations and history education. Historical commemorations, mainly about war and revolution in modern Chinese history, have been one of the burgeoning activities used by the Chinese state to promote patriotism,³⁰ and 'the backward will be beaten' has become a part of the habitual narration in them. In the *People's Daily*, many articles written for historical commemorations, particularly war commemorations, mention 'the backward will be beaten,' such as during the anniversaries of the Opium War,³¹ the Eight-Power Alliance Invasion,³² the Manchurian Incident,³³ the First Sino-Japanese War,³⁴ and the War of Resistance against Japan.³⁵ The standard 'templates' used to narrate the past in war commemorations often begin with the stories of the humiliation history, then tell audiences the historical lesson of 'the backward will be beaten,' and promote patriotic slogans and visions including self-strengthening, national development, and national security.

'The backward will be beaten' has also been integrated into history education, which was elevated to an unprecedentedly high position with the launching of the patriotic education

²⁸Zhao, 'Chinese nationalism and its international orientations', p. 10.

²⁹Some revolutionary discourses including class struggle and anti-imperialism remain in history textbooks. And the lack of will to resist by the ruling blocs remains in a strong position when speaking of military defeats by the Qing court and the GMD. The sober modernization discourse and the passionate revolutionary class struggle discourse, therefore, are mixed in official historical narratives.

³⁰Suisheng Zhao, 'A state-led nationalism: the patriotic education campaign in post-Tiananmen China', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31(3), (1998), pp. 287–302.

³¹Qiao Huantian, 鸦片战争给中国近代社会带来了什么? [What did the Opium War bring to Chinese modern society?], *People's Daily*, (June 1, 1990).

³²Huang Huachang, 毋忘国耻 弘扬爱国主义精神 [Never forget humiliation, uphold patriotic spirit], *People's Daily*, (August 14, 1990).

³³Liu Maokun, '九一八'事变的历史启示 [Historical enlightenment of the '9.18 Incident'], *People's Daily*, (September 16, 1991).

³⁴Qiao Huantian, 甲午战争的历史思考 [Historical reflection on the First Sino-Japanese War], *People's Daily*, (August 24, 1994).

³⁵*People's Daily*, 和平与正义是不可战胜的——纪念中国人民抗日战争胜利五十周年 [Peace and justice are invincible: commemorating the 50th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese people's War of Resistance] (September 3, 1995).

campaign.³⁶ The 1996 *History Teaching Guidelines for High School* (全日制普通高级中学历史教学大纲) required schools to educate students to learn from the historical lesson of 'the backward will be beaten' in the 'patriotic thought' section, as the major component of the 'thought education' guiding the teaching of Chinese modern and contemporary history.³⁷ In Baidu xueshu, some articles published in education journals or magazines also discuss the practices of using 'the backward will be beaten' in patriotic education, including middle school and college teachers' own experiences.³⁸

Although the modernization and open-door policy motivated the popularization of 'the backward will be beaten', the institutionalization of this historical lesson has rather been embedded with China's memory and nationalist politics. So, the West and Japan are simultaneously positive examples China should learn from in terms of development and negative perpetrators in history that deserve to be resented. On the one hand, since the West and Japan hold the key for China's modernization, developing cooperative relations with and making pragmatic accommodations to them are vital to China's national interests.³⁹ On the other hand, the domestic needs for political legitimation motivate the ongoing production of the negative images of the Other. The contradictory images of the Other shape the puzzle of China's national identity: Why do we need to cooperate with the former enemies? Have they changed themselves from threats to friends? Have we forgiven them and decided to look toward the future? There are divergent answers to such key questions. Yet 'the backward will be beaten,' if not other historical knowledge, answers the puzzle of identity by indicating historical *continuity* rather than change: even in the new international environment, China has to strengthen itself to prevent the historical mistakes from happening again.

Power, Anxiety and Security

Although China has established and even proactively promotes a set of cooperative and de-securitized discourses of world politics, such as 'peace and development' and 'China-foreign friendship,' other realist and conflictual security discourses, such as anti-American hegemony, paradoxically, have also been under dynamic renewal and reconstruction. 'The backward will be beaten,' when it has become hegemonic and institutionalized historical knowledge, can be habitually recalled to legitimate such security and nationalistic discourses. Since memory is exceptionally persistent under some conditions,⁴⁰ the mythic lesson from the past can continually inform the present by simplifying complex information and justifying the continuation of history. 'The backward will be beaten' indicates a pessimistic view of world politics for its lonely self-help character: if one state lags behind others, it will be suppressed, bullied, or invaded militarily or economically (depending on the interpretation of the word 'beaten'). If the state does not want to be beaten, it must be advanced and powerful.

From this point of view, Chinese nationalism, learning from the Century of Humiliation, rests on the perception of the hierarchy of state power and security in the competitive world. The use of 'the backward will be beaten' in official discourse reflects the state's anxiety over national security in terms of power comparison. The Other is not only dangerous, but also advanced. Such anxiety was largely muted in official discourse in the Maoist era but returned when the officialdom openly

³⁶Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*.

³⁷课程教材研究所Curriculum and Textbook Research Institute, ed. 20世纪中国中小学课程标准教学大纲汇编: 历史卷 [*The Compilation of Curriculum Standards and Teaching Guidelines of China's Middle and Elementary Schools in the 20th Century: History*] (Beijing: People's Education Press, 2001), p. 696.

³⁸Shen Liping, 有感于学生的'落后就要挨打'观 ['Feeling about students' views of 'the backward will be beaten'], 中学历史教材参考 *Teaching Reference of Middle School History 7*, (2006), p. 39; Zhang Xule, 'The importance of strengthening college students' humiliation history education in colleges' [高校加强大学生屈辱历史教育的重要性], 南都学坛 *Academic Forum of Nandu* 20(5), (2000), pp. 111–112.

³⁹Suisheng Zhao, 'Foreign policy implications for Chinese nationalism revisited: the strident turn', *Journal of Contemporary China* 22(82), (2013), pp. 539–540.

⁴⁰Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

recognized China's backwardness after the Cultural Revolution. The 'paper tigers' are actually the real formidable tigers. The anxiety is particularly significant when China faces the American superpower. Even though the concept of 'American imperialism' has been gradually marginalized since the reform and opening up, in China's official discourse American 'hegemonism' (霸权主义) and 'power politics' (强权政治) resting on American economic, military and technological power are regarded as the main threat to China and the world. The alert on the American threat can be used when recasting what happened in the past. For example, in an article reflecting on the Manchurian Incident, the *People's Daily* wrote:

The 9.18 Incident and Japan's decades of invasion of China once again proves that the backward must be beaten, and only a strong country can defend itself against the enemy. To use one's strength to humiliate the weak (恃强凌弱) and to bully the soft and fear the strong (欺软怕硬) are the habitual means of all hegemonism to invade and expand. If one country or one nation does not want to be intervened by hegemonism but stand on its own in the world of nations, the fundamental way is to build the country, constantly increase comprehensive national strength, and catch up with the developed countries.⁴¹

The anxiety over the power gap between China and the US broke out during the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Kosovo, when the official media frequently used 'the backward will be beaten' to alert the nation to threats from the powerful US. This crisis seemed to prove again the historical lesson China has learned from its history. In the interpretation, the US could use military means to intervene in Kosovo and bomb the Chinese embassy because it was more powerful, and if China wanted to fend off the US threats, self-strengthening was the only choice:

Many things happened in today's world are intervened by the US or have an American background. Whoever does not obey its command will be regarded as 'obstacles.' The US beats [others] if it wants, and sanctions [others] if it wants. After all, doesn't it rely on its economic power? Angry people draw a conclusion from it: 'the backward will be beaten, and only by strength can we be protected from foreign humiliation.'⁴²

'The backward will be beaten' is best situated in the catching-up phase of economic and military development. This raises the question of whether the lesson still matters if China has become much more powerful and significantly narrowed the gap with the US after several decades of high-speed development. The answer is yes, and 'the backward will be beaten' remains influential in China. Even though national confidence has been rising due to China's development, the anxiety over the power gap between China and the US—which, although it has narrowed, remains—and the perceived threats continue to exist. 'The backward will be beaten' retains its presence in official discourse to justify the need for self-strengthen, including military buildup:

The backward will be beaten—the rule of the jungle of international competition never has mercy on the weak. The strength of a country must rely on the army to win wars—the dialectics of a strong country and a strong military has been proved by history again and again.⁴³

Not only used by officialdom, 'the backward will be beaten' has influenced the public understanding of international relations and has contributed to sustaining the legitimacy of non-official popular nationalism. Some Chinese netizens use the framework of 'the backward will be beaten' to view international conflicts, such as Western military intervention in other states. For example, when the US launched missiles to attack Syria in 2018, one post states, 'The US etc. carried out a military strike against Syria. That the backward will be beaten is the truth.'⁴⁴ In such texts, the US is seen, again, as the powerful perpetrator humiliating 'backward' states. In contrast, the reason the US does not invade China is simply attributed to China's power:

⁴¹People's Daily, 'Historical enlightenment of the '9.18 Incident'.

⁴²Huang Hong and Ji Ming, 凝聚在爱国主义的伟大旗帜下 [Unify under the great banner of patriotism], *The People's Daily*, (May 27, 1999).

⁴³People's Daily, 锻造面向未来的胜战之师 [Forge the future-oriented victorious army] (September 28, 2016).

⁴⁴Fengfang 97, 美等对叙利亚进行军事打击, 落后就要挨打是真理 [The US etc. carried out a military strike against Syria. The backward will be beaten is the truth], *Baidu*, April 14, 2018, accessed January 11, 2020, <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/5647980551>.

The fittest survive. The backward will be beaten. The brutal law of the world has not changed at all in the past 100 years ... The reason why China can sit at the chess table [to play with the other states], and not descend to the level of a chess piece, is because it has been awakened by the Century of Humiliation. China is not the China of that time.⁴⁵

Certainly, today's China is not the China in the Century of Humiliation, but it is still not strong enough for many nationalists. With regard to the comparison between China and the US, netizens seem to be blunter and more self-critical about the remaining power gap than the officialdom and many Western media outlets. According to them, unlike some romantic Western discourses hyping a rising 'Chinese hegemon,' China is still much more backward than the US. The recent Sino-American trade war and the American sanctions on the ZTE and Huawei have exposed the technological and economic gap between the two nations, and it again triggered the popular use of 'the backward will be beaten.'⁴⁶ The superior but threatening image of the US remains in China's public discourse.

Therefore, for the Chinese state, to avoid being backward-beaten and to make China a strong, wealthy, and secure country have become the key to its legitimacy. Official discourse shows an optimistic attitude to what China has learned from the historical lesson of the 'Century of Humiliation': China has become different from the past; it has become richer and stronger, revealing the contrasting images of backwardness-humiliation and strength-pride. To construct a strong and secure image of China could be the best response to 'the backward will be beaten.' Yet the persistent appearance of 'the backward will be beaten' in both official and public discourses, as we have seen before, reflects the unsettled feeling of insecurity and the recognition of the remaining power gap between China and the advanced world.

Alternative Discourses of 'The Backward Will Be Beaten'

Even though 'the backward will be beaten' occupies a dominant position when reflecting on the Century of Humiliation, there are also disagreements at the societal level. In this section, the author exemplifies two alternative or counter discourses, and notably, both are based on different interpretations of the past and different understanding of national security.

Other Factors Matter: Not Backward Will Also Be Beaten

The first type of critique on 'the backward will be beaten' questions the economic and technological determinism in the dictum, which is considered to be too simplified or to eschew the real factors that determine the result of war. Writers who hold such a view use counter-examples in history to discredit 'the backward will be beaten', such as: 1. Some more advanced Chinese dynasties, such as the Song dynasty, were defeated by more backward states; 2. The Qing was not as backward as conventional knowledge says, considering its large economic size in the nineteenth century; 3. Backward China reached a stalemate with the advanced US in the Korean War. Such examples prove that backward states can win against advanced ones. Why China was humiliated in its modern history, therefore, requires other explanations. Critics argue for other factors, such as cultural and political, to be included in the shaping of military victory and defeat.

The cultural perspective partly repeats the lack of will to resist used in official narratives, such as the easy surrender of the Qing or GMD armies in front of foreign invaders. Yet, unlike the official

⁴⁵Gaozhonglishilaoshi, 叙利亚被轰炸! 100年前落后要挨打, 百年后世界还是那个世界 [Syria was bombed! The backward will be beaten in a hundred years ago, and the world is still the world after a hundred years], *Sohu*, April 17, 2018, accessed January 11, 2020, http://www.sohu.com/a/228562873_544870.

⁴⁶Chuangkexiaohu, 新时代的落后就要挨打[The backward will be beaten in the new era], *Baidu*, May 1, 2018, accessed January 11, 2020, <http://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1599137562261763893&wfr=spider&for=pc>; Gudeli'an 1991, 中兴这件事说明落后就要挨打仍是真理 [The case of ZTE shows that 'the backward will be beaten' is still the truth], *Tianya shequ*, April 19, 2018, accessed January 11, 2020, <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-worldlook-1834631-1.shtml>.

narratives, which attribute the lack of will to resist to the ruling blocs, the cultural perspective frames the cultural incapacity of resistance, such as the lack of national solidarity—the status of ‘a plate of sands’—as a national problem, rather than only the ruling class. This is markedly different from the official construction of the mythic image of the brave and powerful Chinese people.

One notable example of the cultural perspective comes from Wang Xiaodong, a leading writer on Chinese nationalism in the 1990s and 2000s. In the article ‘Building the new state character in the 21st century’ in *China’s Road under the Shadow of Globalization* (全球化阴影下的中国之路), one of the most prominent nationalist work in the 1990s, Wang contended that ‘the backward will be beaten’ itself is not wrong, but ‘backwardness,’ in his definition, includes multiple aspects, such as economic, military, political, and *national will* (民族意志).⁴⁷ Wang presented two main points as to why China was defeated by the foreign powers. First, it was because of the technological gap between China and the foreign powers,⁴⁸ and second, China lacked the culture of fighting, or the martial culture (尚武精神), as one part of its backwardness. In his view, both the Qing court and the Chinese people did not have enough courage and will to fight against invaders.⁴⁹ In another influential article on Chinese nationalism, Wang (2000) addressed the importance of martial culture by using the example of the First Sino-Japanese War. As he argued, the reason that China was defeated by Japan in 1894 was not because of the dictatorship of the Qing court or limited military technologies—Japan was also an authoritarian state and its then marine power was by no means stronger than China’s—but because of the Japan’s extremely strong martial culture, which included both aristocracy and people.⁵⁰ For authors like Wang, cultural strength or backwardness determines the result of war.

From the political perspective, some Chinese scholars contend that political corruption, rather than material backwardness, ensured that China was beaten by the foreign powers. For example, Qian argued that backward-beaten is only a superficial phenomenon of history, whereas the real reason for backward-beaten is political corruption.⁵¹ Xin also regarded that the reason the Qing army was defeated by the British and Japanese armies was primarily due to political corruption, which ruined the fighting capacity of the army and made the Qing court unable to unify the people to fight, rather than the backwardness of weapons.⁵² During the 120th anniversary of the First Sino-Japanese War in 2014, some scholars and media articles pointed out that political corruption was the major reason for the defeat, even though the size of the Chinese economy was larger than Meiji Japan and the Chinese navy seemed to be more powerful than the Japanese one.⁵³

It is worth noting that a major group that takes on a similar political and cultural perspective is from the ‘Leftist’ community, whose members retain their loyalty to Maoism, but are against the return of capitalism and the consequent political corruption after the reform and opening up. For some Leftists, ‘the backward will be beaten’ is a timid, conciliatory, and economically centrist idea in contrast to Maoism. When criticizing the historical lesson, they employ the traditionally revolutionary discourse, such as using the concepts of class, to emphasize political factors in military defeats and national humiliation in the past, such as the political corruption of the ruling blocs and the suppression of the Chinese people by the Qing court and the GMD government. In contrast,

⁴⁷Wang Xiaodong, 建立21世纪的新国格 [Building the new state character in the 21st century], in Fang Ning, Wang Xiaodong and Song Qiang, ed., 全球化阴影下的中国之路 [*China’s Road under the Shadow of Globalization*] (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1999), p. 16.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 15.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Wang Xiaodong, 当代中国民族主义论 [On contemporary Chinese nationalism], 战略与管理 *Strategy and Management* 5, (2000), p. 74.

⁵¹Qian Changming, 不是落后挨打, 而是腐败挨打 [Not backward-beaten, but corruption-beaten], 探索与争鸣 *Exploration and Free Views* 1, (1999), pp. 38–39.

⁵²Xin Zhong, 落后挨打与腐败挨打 [Backward-beaten and corruption-beaten]. In *China’s Road under the Shadow of Globalization*.

⁵³Xiao Yusheng, 甲午战争的历史告诫 [Historical admonition of the First Sino-Japanese War], 决策与信息 *Decision & Information* 9, (2014), pp. 51–53.

China's brave fighting in the Korean War, remembered as a heroic resistance and military victory against the powerful US by Leftists, was due to the political advancement of new socialist China.⁵⁴

Some members of the Leftist community also pay attention to cultural factors, such as the national spirit, ideology, and will to resist, which can be partly dependent on class and politics. By stressing the power of human will, they tend to re-use revolutionary romanticism to oppose the sober and realistic evaluation of the comparison of material power between states. For example, one netizen argued that the Korean War proves that 'the backward can defeat the advanced' when people develop their 'subjective initiatives' (主观能动性).⁵⁵ In contrast, 'the backward will be beaten,' when used by ruling blocs, can be an excuse for not resisting powerful invaders: since the backward cannot win against the advanced, military defeats are forgivable, and even surrender is a reasonable choice. According to one leading Leftist scholar, 'the backward will be beaten' is a speech used by 'Chinese traitors.'⁵⁶

The Leftist critiques on the materially based 'the backward will be beaten' are in tandem with their opposition to the Dengist economically centrist view, which allows the political regress and the formation of a new elite bloc, and low-profile foreign policy, which makes China a timid and passive actor in the world. The Leftist nationalism repeats the radical discourse in the Maoist era and advocates a more assertive and braver stance toward foreign threats, based on the assumption that the political system and popular will are more important than material power.

The Outdated Lesson: The Backward Will Not Be Beaten

The second type of critique goes further, fundamentally questioning the Social Darwinist worldview and de-legitimizing the dominant construction of security threats and nationalism. This type of critique is developed by Chinese liberal scholars and other individuals. Given its focus on individual rights and welfare, Chinese liberalism more often de-prioritizes the meaning of nation-states for individuals, advocates for China's cooperation with the West and participation in globalization, and contrasts itself with various nationalistic and statist thoughts. The liberal critique on 'the backward will be beaten' is based on a progressive historical review—there have been qualitative changes in world politics when compared to the imperialist and colonialist era.

A representative work came from Wang Yeyang, a Chinese historian. He contended that Social Darwinist backward-beaten has been outdated, and war between nation-states becomes increasingly unlikely.⁵⁷ His point of view resonated with the discourse of globalization, interdependence, international constitutionalism, and Kantian peace in liberal International Relations theory. In the article, he spoke of the progressive side of Western thinking on international relations in the modern era:

... while Western nationalism flourished, the thoughts that criticize Social Darwinism, criticize power politics (强权主义) that justifies aggression, and advocate peace, democracy, humanitarianism, and rule of law were also developing ... By the end of the Second World War, and after a half-century of transition, historians all over the world have acknowledged that the era of nationalist imperialism, which originated in Europe, has become a historical relic, and the world has been decolonized. Human society has eventually entered a new era.⁵⁸

⁵⁴Xie Huajian, 落后就要挨打?!—写在志愿军抗美援朝入朝作战60周年 [The backward will be beaten?!—Written during the 60th anniversary of the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea], *Wuyou zhi xiang*, October 3, 2010, accessed January 11, 2020, <http://www.wyzxwk.com/Article/zatan/2011/06/178431.html>.

⁵⁵Liu Lang, 从抗美援朝纪录片《不能忘却的伟大胜利》谈‘落后就要挨打’ [On 'the backward will be beaten' through the documentary on the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea, *The Great Victory that Cannot Be Forgotten*], *Honggehui wang*, November 6, 2013, accessed January 11, 2020, <http://www.szhgh.com/Article/wdsd/wenyi/201311/36335.html>.

⁵⁶Zhang Hongliang, 张宏良: 牢记历史教训, 勿蹈悲剧覆辙 [Zhang Hongliang: remember the historical lesson, do not repeat tragedies], *Minzu fuxing wang*, September 18, 2017, accessed January 11, 2020, <http://www.mzfxw.com/e/action/ShowInfo.php?classid=12&id=92053>.

⁵⁷Wang Yeyang, ‘落后就要挨打’论已过时 [The theory of 'the backward will be beaten' has been outdated], *Yanhuang chunqiu*, 2014, accessed January 11, 2020, <http://www.yhcqw.com/31/9438.html>.

⁵⁸Ibid.

According to the author, in this new era, globalization has become the unstoppable trend of economic development, and China has been the biggest beneficiary of global economic integration. Unlike the pessimistic historical belief indicated by ‘the backward will be beaten,’ the author pointed out the progressive nature of history:

‘The backward will be beaten’ can be a summary of the historical lesson from the past era. Yet today’s era has made progress. Human society has eventually said farewell to that ‘survival of the fittest’ Social Darwinist era.⁵⁹

This progressive and optimistic view is also echoed and developed by some Chinese netizens. When discussing the ZTE incident, one netizen argued that ‘the backward will be beaten’ is dependent on the rule of the jungle, which has been abandoned by humankind, whereas the modern civilization is characterized by universal values such as democracy, freedom, rule of law, and human rights.⁶⁰ The author asserted that a state believing in ‘the backward will be beaten’ could be self-defeating:

Because a country having such an idea naturally fears and flatters more powerful countries, and meanwhile despises and humiliates weaker ones—the so-called ‘bullying the weak and fearing the strong.’ The more strength a country believing in this idea seeks, the more fear and hostility it may evoke among other countries . . . So, in modern civilized societies, people must abandon the backward ideas such as ‘the backward will be beaten,’ take the initiative to accept and maintain universal values, and open their minds to integrate into the world.⁶¹

Such liberal thought provides a progressive image of the Other in world politics that substantially differs from the imperialistic Other in history. The progressive historical view de-links the past and the present, and the historical lesson contextualized in the past era has become outdated and should be forgotten.

Yet such liberal views, compared to the massive support for ‘the backward will be beaten,’ are only marginal in China’s public discourse. Even though liberalism has gained considerable influences in Chinese academia and the field of economic reform, it is usually under the pressure from the state and popular nationalists. Liberals’ retrospect of the progressive history of Western international relations, as mentioned above, could be very unfamiliar and even inconceivable for many domestic audiences.

Conclusion

This article elucidates the discursive construction of the historical lesson of the Century of Humiliation. Although ‘the backward will be beaten’ appeared in the Maoist era, it did not become a popular dictum until the reform and opening up. Initially, it was usable for justifying the modernization and open-door policy, but then it was included to serve the needs for nationalist memory politics. The institutionalization of the remembrance of ‘the backward will be beaten’ has turned it into an everyday political and educational practice. The trace of the discursive changes suggests that a historical lesson is a processual construction subject to different situational needs and ideological configurations.

‘The backward will be beaten’ has made a significant influence on China’s security and foreign policy discourse, providing a habitual leeway to frame the complex interactions between states. It helps nurture and sustain a nationalist culture that is characterized by the emphasis on catching-up development, the production of external threats, the anxiety over the power gap with the advanced Other, and the imagination of a realist and Social Darwinist world. It provides succinct but powerful knowledge to justify the state-led building of hard power for national security and pride. So, what China has learned from its history is very different from Germany and Japan. One can certainly argue

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Naizhihe, 从中兴被罚事件说开去——比芯片更急需的是什么[Starting with the ZTE penalty: what is more urgent than chips?] *Kaidi wangluo*, April 28, 2018, accessed January 11, 2020, <http://club.kdnet.net/dispbbs.asp?id=12735599&boardid=1>.

⁶¹Ibid.

that ‘the backward will be beaten’ is a biased reflection on the past and anachronistically repeats the knowledge of the colonial and imperialist era, but for many Chinese nationalists, this lesson, as a vital part of the hegemonic memory, should be remembered as a truth regardless of time.

On the other hand, collective memory and historian lessons are also under contestation, even in an authoritarian context. According to its critics, such as some Leftists and liberals, ‘the backward will be beaten’ provides a misunderstanding of the past and contributes to the construction of an incorrect image of the present. So, this lesson should be forgotten rather than remembered. The disputes over the lesson reflect the divergent interpretations of the past and attitudes toward security and nationalism. The first type of critique shares the competitive worldview and the anxiety over national security but have different understandings of how to make China secure. Liberal critics propose a fundamentally different vision by emphasizing the progressiveness of history and world politics and contribute to the de-legitimatization of the production of danger and security-based nationalism.

Despite such alternative views, the powerful presence of the mythic lesson from the past, when it appears as taken-for-granted hegemonic knowledge, can continue to powerfully inform the present. ‘The backward will be beaten’ can only be removed from the center of China’s memory discourse when alternatives (such as the liberal view) gain much more discursive power, or when China becomes more powerful than the US and the discourse of backwardness itself becomes inappropriate. Even though China has been profoundly engaged in globalization and has partly established its cooperative policies with the West and Japan, there appear to be enormous obstacles for China to abandon the conflictual view of history and international relations. The shadow of the past remains in China’s political culture, and its persistence could be one of the factors that slows or prevents China’s further integration into the liberal international system.

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Notes on contributor

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