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The “Century of Humiliation” and China’s National Narratives

Commissioners: Thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts on China’s national narratives and their implications for Chinese foreign and national security policy. I want to note that the views I express in this testimony are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of CNA or any of its sponsors or affiliates.

I have been asked to discuss the role that China’s historical memories of subjugation at the hands of Western powers during the 19th and early 20th centuries play in PRC policy debates, particularly debates about the current state of geopolitics and about China’s emergence as a great power. I will discuss how these experiences, and subsequent interpretations of them, have helped structure Chinese elite and popular views of China’s past, present, and future role in the international realm. I will also note some implications of these views for China’s current-day foreign policy, and for some of the attitudes that its influential thinkers display toward the United States.

There are five main points that I wish to make.

- First, the “Century of Humiliation” – a period between 1839 and 1949 when China’s government lost control over large portions of its territory at the hands of foreigners – is a key element of modern China’s founding narrative.
- Second, the Century of Humiliation is thought by many Chinese today to provide historical lessons that are taken as indicative of how strong Western powers tend to behave toward China.
- Third, the intellectual debates about the nature of international relations that took place during the Century of Humiliation underpin similar elite debates that are taking place in China today.¹ Concerns with the nature of interstate competition, with the possibility for equality among nation-states, and with the question of whether the international system might evolve into something more peaceable in the future, remain salient topics of discussion and debate in China today.
- Fourth, although the PRC government maintains that the Century of Humiliation ended when the CCP won the Chinese civil war and established itself as the ruling regime, there remain several vestiges of that period that, in the minds of many Chinese, must be rectified before China’s recovery will be considered complete. The most important of these – and perhaps the only one that is non-negotiable – is the return of Taiwan to the mainland.
- Fifth, there is significant lack of consensus among present-day Chinese elites about what the lessons learned from the Century of Humiliation mean for China’s future trajectory in the global arena. The Century of Humiliation provides key frameworks through which Chinese intellectuals

¹ By “elites,” I refer to high-ranking members of the Chinese government, the Party, the military, and government-affiliated think tanks and research organizations.

and policy-makers may view China's place in the world, but there is significant variation in their interpretations. We should be cautious about assuming that one path will definitely be chosen.

What was the “Century of Humiliation”?

Anyone who spends time reading Chinese newspapers or official speeches, or talking at length with PRC nationals, will eventually encounter the “Century of Humiliation.” This tale of loss and redemption, in which modern China was forged out of a crucible of suffering and shame at the hands of foreign powers, has become part of the PRC's founding narrative, in the same way that colonial Americans' chafing under British taxation and their subsequent battle for independence is part of ours.

This “long century” of 110 years opened in 1839, when Britain sent gunboats up the Yangtze River to compel China's rulers to open their ports and markets to the opium trade, at the beginning of what came to be known as the First Opium War. This experience, and subsequent interactions with other Western nations that made similar demands for trade access, marked China's first sustained exposure to the West, and highlighted imperial China's military and diplomatic weakness in the face of Western power.

The shock to the Chinese worldview cannot be overestimated. Historically, China had sat comfortably at the center of a ring of tributary relationships with its neighboring countries. Its rulers had limited familiarity with any civilization outside of Asia, and in their few contacts with Westerners had made clear that they expected the same deference from far-away leaders as they did from those on their periphery. Now, in the space of a little over a century, China suffered a long list of political, military, and cultural indignities, including the following:

- China was forced to open and effectively cede control over a series of “treaty ports” along the Chinese coast and the Yangtze River, in which a number of foreign powers enjoyed extraterritorial privileges. China also ceded Hong Kong and other territories entirely.
- Japan, which the Chinese historically had regarded as an inferior, “younger brother,” was also challenged by the West, but its rulers proved to be far more adept than China's at remaking their political and military system to meet these new challenges. By the mid-1890s, Japan's military was strong enough to defeat China's and to gain control over Taiwan and portions of Manchuria. In the 1910s and again in the 1930s, Japan encroached ever further into Chinese territory.
- Throughout the 19th century, China was riven by massive rebellions in which tens of millions of people died; these uprisings were frequently fanned by popular opposition to the growing foreign presence and by the imperial government's acquiescence to foreign demands.
- Independence movements in Tibet, Mongolia, and Xinjiang in the 1910s, '20s and '30s further reduced China's territory.
- The millennia-old imperial system collapsed forever in 1911, leading to an extended period of further chaos in which the new, nominally republican government was unable to control large swaths of China's remaining territory.
- The eight-year long war against Japan (World War II) and the multi-decade Chinese civil war between the Chinese Communist (CCP) and Nationalist (KMT) Parties devastated the Chinese landscape and tore its people apart.

This period was deemed to have ended only when the CCP and the Red Army (the predecessor of today's People's Liberation Army, or PLA) won the Chinese civil war, drove Chiang Kai-shek's KMT off the mainland, and established the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949.

The Century of Humiliation as legitimizing narrative for the CCP and PLA

The experiences of the late 19th and early 20th century became an indelible turning point for China. An American author wrote in 1959 that “The Chinese have one very broad generalization about their own history: they think in terms of ‘up to the Opium war’ and ‘after the Opium war’.”² This remains true to this day. This period was crucial for Chinese scholars and statesmen – both at the time and today – both as a founding moment for modern China, and as the source of a number of lessons about the nature of national power and of the modern international system. The experiences of the Century of Humiliation drove these figures to ask: Why were Western nations strong and China weak, and how might China improve its situation?

There emerged a wide range of competing answers to these questions. Chinese thinkers tended (in keeping with their 19th-century Western counterparts) toward cultural explanations of China’s inability to compete in the modern international system. For instance, they asserted, Western nations since ancient Greece have been oriented toward active, often militarily aggressive, interstate competition. China, on the other hand, was thought to have a national culture that was noncompetitive, non-striving, and defensive.

At the time that these contrasts were first drawn, many Chinese figures thought the Western way of doing things was better, and portrayed China’s people as stagnant, complacent, and backward. The West’s invasion and subjugation of China was seen by many of these thinkers to be a natural outcome of national strength. Many of these thinkers concluded that the way for China to grow stronger in the international arena was for it to become more like the West – by creating new forms of government, by reforming its social structures and values, by strengthening its military, or by some combination of these.

Over time, however, an earlier diversity of views began to crystallize into a consensus in China that the problem lay not with China but with the West. By the 1920s the strident articulation of this view had become a useful way for China’s emerging political parties to appeal to the angry nationalism of China’s increasingly active popular movements. For instance, China’s many enforced agreements with foreign power come to be collectively labeled as “unequal treaties” that made it impossible for China to gain power under existing international law – a term that persists to this day.³

Today, this narrative has become a key legitimizer for CCP rule, because the CCP is portrayed as the *only* modern Chinese political party that was able to successfully stand up to foreign aggression. In the words of a current-day Politburo member, “the establishment of new China [i.e. communist China] ... put an end to the situation in which old China was split up, the nation was subject to humiliation, and the people experienced untold sufferings.”⁴ The ability of Mao Zedong’s government to effectively wield diplomatic, economic, and military power are depicted in CCP and PLA literature as having started China down its present path to global influence. Chinese propaganda glorifies the exploits of the PLA and the Red Army in fighting off China’s would-be subjugators, including the Japanese, the KMT army, and the United States in Korea, and the PLA teaches its personnel that China’s Communist forces have never lost a war.

² Richard Harris, “China and the West,” *International Affairs* 35:2 (April 1959), p. 162.

³ See especially Zhitian Luo, “National Humiliation and National Assertion: The Chinese Response to the Twenty-One Demands,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 27:2 (May 1993), pp. 297-319; and Dong Wang, “The Discourse of Unequal Treaties in Modern China,” *Pacific Affairs* 76:3 (Fall 2003), pp. 399-425.

⁴ Liu Yunshan, “Jifa aiguo renqing, zhenfen minzu jingshen, ningju renmin liliang” (Stimulate a passion for patriotism, inspire national spirit, and pool the people’s efforts), transcript of a public speech, *Renmin Ribao* (14 April 2009), p. 162.

This narrative allows China's government and people to interpret contemporary successes through the lens of earlier failures.⁵ The scholar Peter Hays Gries, analyzing the popular and official outcry that resulted after the accidental 1999 US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, provides one example when he quotes a *People's Daily* article that makes explicit reference to the Century of Humiliation:

This is 1999, not 1899. This is not ... the age when the Western powers plundered the [Chinese] imperial palace at will, destroyed the Old Summer Palace, and seized Hong Kong and Macao ... China is a China that has stood up; it is a China that defeated the Japanese fascists; it is a China that had a trial of strength and victory over the United States on the Korean battleground. The Chinese people are not to be bullied⁶

A persistent feeling of insecurity

Despite China's recent successes, deep-seated suspicions of Western intentions linger, and are stoked by the CCP's continual employment of the Century of Humiliation narrative. CCP and PLA writings still present China as the perpetual and innocent victim of Western nations' continued determination to subjugate it. Recent PLA publications on martial strategy, for instance, assert that Western nations are fundamentally rapacious, greedy, and aggressive, having grown historically out of "slave states [that] frequently launched wars of conquest and pillage to expand their territories, plunder wealth, and extend their sphere of influence."⁷ Such writings often add that China, by contrast, is by nature a "peace-craving and peace-loving" nation.⁸ In this view, because the West has not fundamentally changed, China must seek peace, but prepare for war. Hence President Hu Jintao, in a 2004 speech laying out the new "historic missions" of the People's Liberation Army, warned that "Western hostile forces have not yet given up the wild ambition of trying to subjugate us."⁹

Framing China's current situation

~~This persistent feeling of insecurity today is used by China's leadership – and by its people – to frame both China's current national concerns and its future national aspirations. China is often portrayed as having suffered three kinds of loss during the Century of Humiliation: a loss of territory, a loss of control over its internal and external environment, and a loss of international standing and dignity. Each of these represents an injustice to be rectified.~~

~~On the issue of territory, there is a fairly straightforward consensus that China's work is not yet done. From the height of China's regional power during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) to its nadir in the 1920s, China effectively lost control over one-third of its territory, a process that later came to be referred to as being "carved up like a melon" (*guafen*). Thus far the PRC has been able to reassert control over Tibet,~~

⁵ Many Western authors have written about this phenomenon; for just a few of the best, see the recent works of William A. Callahan, Paul A. Cohen, and Peter Hays Gries.

⁶ Han Zhongkun, "Zhongguo, bushi yibajiujiu" (This is not 1899 China), *Renmin Ribao*, 12 May 1999; quoted in Peter Hays Gries, "Tears of Rage: Chinese Nationalist Reactions to the Belgrade Embassy Bombing," *The China Journal*, No. 46 (July 2001), p. 32.

⁷ Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy* [English edition] (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2005), p. 426.

⁸ Lin Chengdong and Chen Zhongdong, "The Importance of National Defense Construction and Army Building in the Overall Layout for Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," *Jiefangjun Bao* (6 October 2007), p. 6.

⁹ Hu Jintao, "Renqing xinshiji xinjieduan wojun lishi shiming" (Understand the new historic missions of our military in the new period of the new century), 2004.