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Reading Years of Humiliation. Sino-Russian Border and China's National Identity

Two centuries ago, the will of the Western powers imposed the Westphalia nation-state centric system on China. The contrast between these two different perceptions of the World in the 19th Century plays an important role in shaping modern-day China's national identity. In fact, Russia among the other Western powers, was an aggressor that humiliated Middle Kingdom. More to the point, as being a developing state, China needs to create its own identity, that it is usually built contrary to the other. In this study, which has been based mainly on Chinese primary sources such as books, articles and commentaries published both in paper form and on the Internet,¹ the author focuses, the author mainly focuses on analyzing the role of historical spots related to the Sino-Russian border in the North-East of China in shaping China's national identity from the central and local perspective. The major issues to answer are: why and to what extent Sino-Russian border problems and 19th Century history has played a role in shaping Chinese identity? What kind of argument have Chinese used to describe and judge the problem from historical and political perspective?

The article begins with an introduction of China's patriotic education and major steps taken by the authorities in order to cover the identity crisis. Next, the author describes the history of Sino-Russian relationship in the context of border areas and finally presents official readings of the history in patriotic education course books as well as in historical sites in border

¹ Ye Shengtao, *Zhongguo jindai aiguo gushi* (Patriotic histories of Contemporary China), Shandong Shaonian Ertong Chubanshe, Jinnan 1985; *Qingshao nian aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu duwen* (Biographies for patriotic education), Wuhan Daxue Chubanshe, Wuhan 1991 and *Aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu cidian* (The Dictionary of Patriotic Education) Ed. Han Zhangfeng, Beijing Yuyan Xueyuan, Beijing 1995.

provinces mainly in Heilongjiang. In fact, Chinese government tries to shape Chinese identity, but not only through central planning but also by flaming patriotism at the local level. At the end China becomes a composition of local “Chineseness.” The major definition of identity applied by the author has been presented by Erik Erikson whose own definition was based by the needs for reunify the “self” into more collective society. Next the concept of national identity offered by Sidney Verba and Lucian Pye is the “set of individuals who fall within the decision-making scope of the state.” This conceptualization was determined by the boundaries and common language, ethnic or racial origin, and political culture. In this context, as argued by Habermas and Gellner there is a direct correlation between nationalism as a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones.²

China’s Patriotic and Historical Education—an Overview

In the early 1990s, along with the leadership change (Deng Xiaoping-Jiang Zemin), patriotic education was introduced. Due to two factors: the “three belief crises” namely crisis of faith in socialism, crisis of belief in Marxism, crisis of trust in the party and the weaker position of the leadership compare to its predecessors the new political campaign was started. The leadership, namely Deng Xiaoping acknowledged that the *biggest mistake was made in the field of education, primarily in ideological and political education—not just of students but of the people in general*. In August 1991 the government passed two laws: “*Notice about Conducting Education of Patriotism and Revolutionary Tradition by Exploiting Extensively Cultural Relics*” and “*General Outline on Strengthening Education on Chinese Modern and Contemporary History and National Conditions*.” More to the point in August 1994 the campaign carried out at the full scale: the CPCs Central Committee issued the “*Outline on Implementing Patriotic Education*.” Realizing the previous mistakes the government admitted:

If we want to make the patriotic thoughts the core theme of our society, a very strong patriotic atmosphere must be created so that the people can be influenced and nurtured by the patriotic thoughts and spirit all times and everywhere in their daily life. It is the sacred duties for the press

²L. Dittmer, S. Kim, *In a search of a Theory of National Identity*, In: China Quest for National Identity, eds. L. Dittmer and S. Kim, Cornell University Press, New York 1993, pp. 7-10.

and publishing, radio, film and television departments of all levels to use advanced media technology to conduct patriotic education to the masses.³

The paper refers to James Pennebaker notion of collective memories, whether real or concocted, has been at the root of conflicts, prejudice, nationalism, and cultural identities. Moreover, as argued by Volkan who identified a ‘chosen trauma’ and a ‘chosen glory.’ In contemporary Chinese discourse both of Volkan’s notions have been applied. On the one hand Chinese accused other of being cruel and dishonest, while at the same time underlined its own struggle against all difficulties as a background for being proud. In fact creating people’s memory the authorities tries to built the common non-material platform for collective understanding of “self.”⁴ More to the point, as described by Kalpana Misra Chinese Marxists’ intellectual discourse in the Deng Xiaoping era moved from Marxist to post-Marxism to overcome the crisis of regime legitimacy.⁵ Although the Communist Party of China used “post-Marxism nationalism,” still tried to prove material factor as the basis of building society. In this context nationalism should be regarded as the attempt to political engineering. The patriotic education named as political education (*zhengzhi jiaoyu*) or national political thoughts education (*minzu sixiang zhengzhi jiaoyu*) has become an inherent part of *scientific development* (*kexue fazhan guan*). To some extent the scientific development should be understand as proving the right that people can be driven by the superior institutions, and not by believes but by scientifically proven experiences. Compare to Mao’s China where centrality of class in building socialism in theory and practice played a crucial role in shaping China’s political system, in post-Tiananmen China nation (Han nation) became the major factor behind building socialism in China.⁶ As described by Zhao Suisheng “pragmatic nationalism” was mainly based on describing China’s uniqueness: China is a beautiful, resource-full country with long tradition, heritage and history, led by Communists to achieve a new goal and secure national interests. The pragmatism expressed in conducting all behaviors according to the national conditions (*guoqing*).⁷ In fact Chinese

³ Zheng Wang, *National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China*, “International Studies Quarterly,” 2002, No. 52, pp. 783-806.

⁴ Zheng Yongnian, *Discovering Chinese Nationalism in China. Modernization, Identity and International Relations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, pp. 12-14.

⁵ Xing Guoxin, *Hu Jintao’s Political Thinking and Legitimacy Building: A Post-Marxist Perspective*, “Asian Affairs,” 2009, pp. 214-215.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 217-218.

⁷ Zhao Suisheng, *A nation-state by construction: dynamics of modern Chinese nationalism*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2004, pp. 219-225.

government has been operating via Sun Yat-sen's concept of the nation that was a product of racial difference. The early Republican nationalism called on the Han Chinese to "recover the state for our own nation . . . [and] not allow other nations to take away our nation's government."⁸ Allen Whiting and Chen Zhimin identify three types of nationalism: affirmative nationalism: foster patriotism and targets attitudes directed toward inward change and constructive international partnership, aggressive nationalism: arouses anger and mobilizes behavior most concerns China's neighbors and assertive nationalism that has a potential to become affirmative or aggressive because it "adds them" as a negative out-group referent to the us of affirmative nationalism.⁹

In the 1990s and at the beginning of 21st Century the Communist Party of China strengthen its voice on national pride and Chinese nation great achievement. Chinese people led by the communist government as in late 1940 s. stood up. In order to respond and control national feelings the CCP used the slogan of "great revival of Chinese nation" (*zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*). For the first time the slogan was used by then party secretary Zhao Ziyang in late 1980s but the popularity aroused under Jiang Zemin's reign. Along with being revived China, as mentioned by Hu Jintao in his 17th Party Congress' report would defend the World peace. In fact patriotism, as well as socialism with Chinese characteristic became the major theme that would build national cohesion. Using its propaganda machines the CCP tries to impose the patriotic thinking and all important policies like education or R&D expenditures that are subordinated to the project of "great revival of Chinese nation."¹⁰

In the historical education the government tries to assess the shortage of being a victim and acknowledge greatness in Chinese history like the Boxer Uprising. By using the Marxian perception on history the major features of Chinese collapse in 19th Century the growing significance of global capitalism especially after the economic crisis in the United Kingdom 1825 and 1837 and the weakness of the Qing's government (not Chinese people). In fact China become the capitalist country, and in within the capitalist

⁸ Chen Zhimin, *Nationalism, Internationalism and Chinese Foreign Policy*, "Journal of Contemporary China," 2005, No. 14, pp. 35-45.

⁹ David M. Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power. Might, Money and Minds*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2008, pp. 147-148.

¹⁰ Compare: Hu Jintao, *Zai quanguo jiaoyu gongzuo huiyi shang de jianghua*, (2010.07.13) [Hu Jintao's speech at the working meeting on education], Renmin Chubanshe, Beijing 2010, pp. 7 and 9.

economy China was exploited by the Western powers and became the victim of Japanese and Western imperialism.¹¹

In the context of shaping identity the anti-Japanese war played an important factor. Under the certain conditions the CCP unified people, not only Han Chinese, but also minorities and even people from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau to take part in the anti-Japanese war.¹² The history proved that only unified society lead by the CCP would be successful and achieve new goals. The paradox of China's opening up is that in the past the opening up was under capitalist pressure, but at the end China has become capitalistic itself. In this regard strengthening controlling over culture or state nationalism might played an important role in discarding society's attention.

At the central level the Propaganda Department under the CCP is responsible for preparing materials and course books for patriotic education. Since 1997 the Central Propaganda Department pointed 353 patriotic education spots mainly referred to the CCP's history. In 1997 only 19 referred to Chinese cultural heritage, anti-imperialist, anti-Japanese and heroic movement only 9, and revolutionary movement and building socialism 75.¹³ [compare table no. 1].

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¹¹ *Zhongguo Jinxianandai shi gangyao (2010 nian xiuding Ban)* [The guideline for Chinese contemporary and modern history], Gaodeng jiaoyu Chubanshe, Beijing 2010, pp. 10-14.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

¹³ *Aiguozhuyi Jiaoyu* [Patriotic education], online: <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/GB/151935/157318/9528324.html> [accessed January 18, 2012].

¹⁴ *Zhongguo Jinxianandai shi gangyao (2010 nian xiuding Ban)* [The guideline for Chinese contemporary and modern history], Gaodeng jiaoyu Chubanshe, Beijing 2010, pp. 10-14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

Table No. 1
The 100 National-Level Patriotic Education Bases

External conflicts (40 sites)	20 sites—anti-Japanese War (1937–1945) 7 sites—Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) 4 sites—Korean War (1950–1953) 1 site—Russian invasion (1858) 1 site—the 1962 China-India War 1 site—the 1662 War with the Dutch over Taiwan 1 site—Invasion of the Eight-Power Allied Forces (1900) 5 sites—Other general anti-imperialism museums/sites
Civil Wars	24 sites) Civil wars between CCP and KMT (1927–1949)
Myths (21 sites)	15 sites—Wonders (ancient architecture, museums of ancient civilizations) 4 sites—Relics for prehistoric civilization 2 sites—Great achievement after 1949
Heroes (15 sites)	7 sites—CCP Leaders 4 sites—Model workers 4 sites—Patriots

Source: Wang Zheng, *National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China*, “International Studies Quarterly,” 2008, Vol. 52, p. 796.

under capitalist pressure, but at the end China has become capitalistic itself. In this regard strengthening controlling over culture or state nationalism might played an important role in discarding society’s attention.

Sino-Russia Border in Contemporary Readings

The historical narratives plays an important part in shaping national identity. Historiography itself was introduced due to the national concerns, and the profession derived its authority from its role as the true spokesmen of the nation as argued by Prasenjit Duara. This process was taken play in Europe in the late 19th Century, while in China is important today.¹⁶ In this context, the Sino-Russian border problem has been not only the bilateral negotiations, but more important to the shaping Chinese identity of the

¹⁶Prasenjit Duara *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, University Of Chicago Press, Chicago 1997, pp. 20-21.

North-East China. Finally, the border dispute was settled in 2007 when Under an agreement signed by the two countries' foreign ministers in July, Russia agreed to give up Tarabarov Island, known as Yinlong in Chinese, and half of Bolshoi Ussuriysky Island, called Heixiazi in Chinese. Since then, when the border issue was settle, Sino-Russian border has become to major theme in shaping Chinese identity in border areas. The North-East of China is a important industrial base of China's industry as well as one of the area poses the largest number of patriotic education spots.¹⁷

In the patriotic education course book the problem of Sino-Russia border in 19th Century fails to be the most important one. In fact, as mentioned in "Guide for Contemporary Chinese History" Russia grabs Chinese territory more than one million square kilometers. Moreover the Li-Lobanov Treaty signed between China and Russia in 1896 allowed Russia to significantly increase its presence in the North-East China.¹⁸ Interestingly special material for self-study of this history materials have not touch the negative feeling against the former invader, but rather strengthen Chinese people's efforts to fight against backwardness and semi-colonial status.¹⁹

The first historical spot has been dedicated to the Treaty of Aigun (Aihun Tiaoyue) of 1858. It reversed the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) by transferring the land between the Stanovoy Mountains and the Amur River from China to Russia. The major problem was that Qing dynasty overexagerated Russian military strength and when Nikola Muravyov threatened China with war, the Chinese side agreed to enter negotiations with Russia.²⁰ As argued by Victor Zatsepine Russian annexed the Amur river territory without military confrontation, as Qing fortification in the region proved insufficient to offer any kind of resistance. The major problems occurred when in 1898 the Qing government leased part of Liaoning Peninsula to Russian as a base for economic and military expansion. At the end of 19th Century Russian started to enlarge their military presence and the number of troops grown to 11,300 soldiers in Port Arthur.²¹ The most crucial moment was taken by armed Russian Cossacks who forced about 3000 people to be deported across

¹⁷ Wo de zuguo (My Motherland) official website: <http://zuguo.cntv.cn/diqu/index.shtml#heilongjiang> [accessed March 12, 2012].

¹⁸ *Zhongguo Jinxiandai shi gangyao (2010 nian xiuding Ban)*..., pp. 20-22.

¹⁹ Compare Self Study Materials of *Zhongguo Jinxiandai shi ganyao* accessed online <http://www.233.com/zikao/note/Gonggong/03708/104847680-2.html> [accessed on May 15, 2012].

²⁰ For further readings see: Byron N. Tzou, *China and International Law, The Boundary Disputes*, Praeger, New York Westport, Connecticut London 1990, pp. 81-84.

²¹ V. Zatsepine, *The Blagoveshchensk Massacre of 1900: The Sino-Russian War and Global Imperialism*, In: James A. Flath, Norman Smith (eds.), *Beyond Suffering: Recounting War in Modern China*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver 2011, pp. 108-110.

the river. Furthermore Russian surrounded Qing forces in Blagoveshchensk and forced them to cross the river in four directions. In the meanwhile, by mistake Qing forces open fire to their own fellows, while Russian troops started to destruct and kill people. More to the point, in order to answer to Boxer Rebelation the Russian government decided to relocate Cossack in the Songhua River area. In August they took Sakhalin and Aigun and continued its occupation in Manchuria.²² Interestingly in mid 1980s. the special course book for patriotic educations referred to the above described issues:

Having a great tradition of self-defense the Chinese nation could not bear humiliation. Being in front of 10 thousand Russian army, bad Russian aggressors, the patriotic masses of the North-East China being filled with pain took ups arms and started to fight.²³

In this unequal fight, when the Russian soldiers burned Chinese people, Chen Qushan a common peasant was a real hero who fought against the occupant. As mentioned in the book published in Jinan “anybody who will try to enslave the Motherland will be defeated.”²⁴

The museum of Aigun Treaty in Heihe city has covered the history of Sino-Russian border problem with a special coverage of Aigun Treaty and the Treaty of Nerchinsk. It provides the wax statues of people who signed both treaties, and the monument of Chinese hero who defended China in late 17th Century under Kangxi Emperor reign – Sa Busu (?–1701). More to the point, the reading of history in Heihe museum failed to touch the problem of Blagoveshchensk’s massacre in 1900. In this context, it shown that the government tent to create rather positive feeling towards Russian people. Otherwise the negative feeling towards Other might put pressure on the government itself and it should have behaved in more assertive and aggressive way.²⁵

In order to present a positive image of the Chinese side in popular central television series “Baijia Lutan” Yuan Chongnian presents Chinese history and culture. Regarding the border issues and Qing dynasty relationship with the Russian Empire he emphasizes the positive role of “anti-Russian treaties” (*fan E tiaoyue*). To some extant according to Chen Shaoying the example of the Treaty of Aigun provides pattern of non-accepted form of behavior. Although the treaty signed with Russian was the shortest the territorial

²² S.C.M. Paine, *Imperial Rivals: China, Russia, and Their Disputed Frontier 1858–1924*, M.E. Shape, Armonk 1996, pp. 215–220.

²³ Ye Shengtao, *Zhongguo jindai aiguo gushi* (Patriotic histories of Contemporary China), Shandong Shaonian Ertong Chubanshe, Jinnan 1985, p. 182.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

²⁵ <http://www.hhds.net/ReadNews.asp?NewsID=266> [accessed April 24, 2012].

losses was excessive. In fact the problem was about corrupted Chinese elites, without national spirit and courage. The 19th Century history should be taken as a lesson for the future of Chinese leadership to properly run the country—he said.²⁶

The first important spot is dedicated to Zhenbaodao “small war” between the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union in March 1969. On 2 March 1969 the first clashes between two armies occurred. From geopolitical point of view the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 heightened Chinese leaders’ concern about Soviet intentions. From the internal point of view the exchange of fire was made in the eve of 9th Party Congress when Lin Biao was named Mao Zedong’s successor.²⁷

In Chinese official media the conflict of 1969 has been named as “a self-defence and counterattack war.” The Chinese soldiers confronted more advanced forces, but due to Chairman Mao Zedong’s slogan “fear no pain, fear no death” they fulfilled their revolutionary duties. Moreover they should serve as an example of securing motherland sovereignty and dignit.²⁸

In 2001 the central government named Zhenbaodao martyrs’ cemetery as a “central level unit of patriotic education” and local authorities started to make a good usage of this. The revolutionary heroes cemetery is administrated by the county government of Baoqing. Yearly, during the Qing Ming festival government has organized the special “reading history” events. Pupils, students, workers and Damanskji’s veterans has been taken part in special patriotic events.²⁹ Moreover to commemorate the revolutionary heroes the local government with the party secretary have laid a wreath on a heroes graves. In July 2002 the Central Military Committee passed a special regulation that named 10 soldiers as a “war heroes.” Sun Yuguo serves a model hero of his time. He as a very vigilant notice Soviet’s provocation and alarmed Chinese military troops.³⁰

²⁶ Chen Shaoying, *Cong Aihui Tiaoyue shuo kai qu* [From the Treaty of Aigun start], “Zhonghua Gui,” 2008, No. 4, pp. 48-49.

²⁷ A.D. Low, *The Sino Soviet confrontation since Mao Zedong. Dispute, détente or conflict?*, New York 1987, p. 34 oraz Chi Su, *The strategic triangle and China’s Soviet policy*, In: China, the United States and the Soviet Union. Tripolarity and policy making in the Cold War, ed. by R. S. Roso, M. E. Sharpe, New York 1993, pp. 44-48.

²⁸ Yang Guihua, *1969 nian Zhenbaodao Ziwei fanji zhan* [Self –defence war in 1969], online: <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/junshi/192/8559/8564/20020704/768476.html> [accessed May 12, 2012].

²⁹ <http://zhaoyuan0622.blog.163.com/blog/static/1605051020113553024243/> [accessed April 24, 2012].

³⁰ http://news.ifeng.com/history/zhongguoxiandaishi/detail_2012_03/08/13049057_0.shtml [accessed April 24, 2012].

In April 2012 the Baoqing County organized the team of Young Pioneers to sweep the martyr's graves. This remembering of heroes that "guarded the motherland dignity and the territorial integrity" has been concerned as an important is of the patriotic education. The government special unit urged young children to study and remember the martyrs last wishes: making swear solemnly, inheritance the glorious tradition and cherishing the memory of the revolutionary martyr.³¹ During the activities revolutionary martyr's great achievements have been introduced and described. The young people has been taught that "the martyrs did laugh in the face of death, and served other."³²

Interestingly in building identity based on the clashes on Sino-Soviet border Chinese authorities strengthen positive image of Chinese heroes, while saying nothing on the Soviet soldiers. Of course, that was the Soviet that started the campaign against China, but still there are no negative feeling on Russian people.

Conclusion

To sum up, the Communist Party of China needs to create a positive atmosphere inside Mainland China. This is the major reason for promoting positive nationalism. Strengthening anti-Western feelings might easily give the government the slip, while strengthening red nationalism, positive feelings on the history of Communist Party in China and its achievements would serve as the legitimization's tool for one party system. As China's internal problems like disparities, popular protests the patriotic education will be changed to be more aggressive and serves as a catalyst of public unrest and the best tool for building national cohesion.

From the central perspective the discourse of unequal treaties after the Opium Wars and conflicts with Russian create a "chosen trauma." Via building the chosen trauma the Communist Party in China presents itself in a favorable lights. The government is only one force to defend China's national sovereignty, dignity and interests. But, contrary to this reading, the Author argues that as being defeated China was urged to signed the equal treaties—government to government agreement. In fact the whole tributary system with China as a center was ruined and Qing dynasty was forced to accept Westphalia World system.

³¹ <http://www.hljbqedu.com/fuwu/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=3831> [accessed May 1, 2012].

³² Ibid.

The national identity of people who signed the agreements with Russian in 19th Century contradicts to the official discourse of Han people. Although the official discourse counts Manchu people as Chinese, the problem of Qing Empire legacy has been still existing. On the one hand mistakes made by last dynasty revealed in “unequal” treaties builds the positive image of the current government, on the other warned of possible mistakes.

In terms of building national identity the major role is played by anti-Japanese war and victory of the communist movement in China. From the local perspective, namely in North-East China Sino-Russia, the historical memory shapes “Chineseness.” In fact, as being a large de-facto federal state Chinese government both at the central and local levels need special channels to transmit national feelings. The easiest way to built national platform is to portray itself in the contrast to other. In this sense, rather only at the local level. China appeared as a conglomeration of local “Chineseness.”

Dominik Mierzejewski

**Reading Years of Humiliation. Sino-Russian Border
and China’s National Identity**

A b s t r a c t

The article provides a perspective on Sino-Russia border issue in shaping China’s identity. In fact, after the collapse of the Soviet Union both sides tried to resolved the border issues. Although China and Russia reached the final agreement Chinese use the history of Sino-Russia relationship to shape national identity. In the historical education the government tries to assess the shortage of being a victim and acknowledge greatness in Chinese history like the Boxer Uprising. At the central level the Anti-Japanese War plays the most important role in shaping national-level identity, while the history of Sino-Russia border is rather linked to the area of North-East of China.

Key words: China’s identity, history of Sino-Russia relationship, Sino-Russia border.

