

Laidlaw Scholars Programme 2023 Cohort

Research Report

Exhibiting the Century of Humiliation: Museum Devices of Historical Memory, Patriotism and Xenophobia of Contemporary China

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Abstract

This paper provides a glimpse into how the Chinese state manipulate historical memory of the Century of Humiliation (1840s-1940s), a period largely unrelated to the communist people's republic, to solidify rule and advance Chinese national pride using museum devices. While not an attempt to fill gaps in academic scholarship, this paper provides on-the-ground primary material crucial to the understanding of process of Chinese historical narrative creation and national education. The paper presents findings from on-site visits of several museums relating to the Century of Humiliation and communist revolutionary history in the Pearl River Delta region, as well as supplementary archival materials.

Acknowledgements

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This very humble research undertaking is not just crucial my career as a researcher but a major milestone to my life goals, comparable to academics publishing their first books. The Laidlaw programme is amongst the first travelling opportunity I did not have to turn down due to personal circumstances. Thanks to support from the programme I ventured out of my hometown Hong Kong for the first time in over a decade, making multiple humble but life-changing short trips to the nearby cities in Guangdong, China, all but within 100km of Hong Kong. A fresh and strange environment set me for massive personal growth – I experienced, learned to be independent, learned practical life skills and overcame the biggest psychological barriers not found in my comfort zone. I am beginning to live a life – all aspects of it, be it good and bad. This is what I have been dreaming since middle school, then already as a history nerd fascinated by the vast and diverse world outside of Hong Kong, was so eager to see it for myself that I constantly lose my mind for years. What I did this summer was a very humble act, but it gave affirmations of my life goals – to travel; to experience; to become a well-rounded, multidisciplinary scholar. As the Chinese adverb goes: ten thousand scrolls are no better than ten thousand miles of journey. I have spent enough devouring secondary literature on my comfy desk in here in Hong Kong, and now I may finally begin to consult primary material, like a good historian would. I therefore proudly present in this report what I found during the duration of my research, even if it may already be ‘widely-published material’, it is in all ways superior to the ten thousand works on sinology I have read prior to this summer.

Introduction

Museums are important spaces states use to nurture and construct national identities, and their visualization of the imagined community to the public often make museum devices valuable tools to understand the formation of various nationalisms. I looked how the Chinese state dealt with its uneasy legacy with foreigners with narrative devices in the museum space.

Historiography and Methodology

Existing research on Chinese nationalism and xenophobia is generally comprehensive. This research hopes to imitate and expand on local public history and museum studies, especially in the English language, to study the engineering of Chinese nationalism. This research also serves as a personal training with the evaluation of research interests, practicality, accessibility of primary sources, and future research training in mind.

This research heavily emphasizes the use of **primary materials**. Since they are hugely limited in scope and size, I will not attempt to provide any revisionist standpoint or hugely supplement existing academic understanding of the subject.

Reverse Orientalism: China's Image of the Occident

Century of humiliation questioned and challenged the self-identity of the Chinese people and the very idea of China. *Zhongguo* – the middle kingdom, the mandate of heaven, the beliefs in these terms were shaken after numerous defeats from foreign powers. More begin to acknowledge western/foreign supremacy on a deep-rooted, societal level, an effect the contemporary Chinese state hopes to reverse.

Self-Victimization

In the portrayal of history, the Chinese state put massive efforts on creating a narrative aligning the interests of the leadership to redo the psychological effects of the century of humiliation among the people to embrace a stronger national identity.

In museums, the Chinese state creates a victim historical narrative by portraying itself as a victim of foreign actions during the Century of Humiliation. By portraying Qing government's inaction for national self-defense, it encourages people to work diligently so they can defend themselves against modern day foreign incursions. Chinese inaction to protect her thousand-years hard earned advantageous position was the root cause foreign imperialists were able to exploit China. By highlighting disunity within China causing the Century of Humiliation, it encourages people to comply with the state's goals, improving the CCP's governing efficiency.



Figure 1: Thirteen Hongs Museum descriptions on 'unethical' trade practices of 'Western colonists'

Bridging History with the Xi Jinping Thought

Historical narratives are conveniently shaped to align with the latest Xi Jinping teachings, further solidifying the collective consciousness of its citizens and foster a sense of national unity. The Century of Humiliation itself addresses a simple but important concept – everyone works diligently towards a stable, prosperous China.

The education of national history and Xi Jinping thought began from kindergarten level and primary schools, in which students are mandated to visit historical sites associated with the Century of Humiliation or the communist revolution. Interestingly, those reflecting ancient and imperial Chinese history – many of them the glory heydays of the Chinese civilization, were not mandatory for visit. Examples of these include Nantou in Shenzhen and the Nanyue Museum in Guangzhou.

The mandatory visits to museums relating to the Century of Humiliation are often organized on weekends, occasionally encouraging students to go with the family or with classmates. Students have to collect seals at each small post in the museum to fill their notebook as part of a school homework. It is a common sight on weekends to see students surrounding a table with the seal rushing to get their homework done, instead of paying attention to the exhibition itself.

Century of Humiliation related museums are well maintained, and see frequent renovations. A museum well-staffed, blasting with cool air conditioning on a hot summer day is very appealing for the average student to spend more time inside. This is a notable comparison with other museums, which lack both funding for maintenance, and also a drastic difference in the number of visitors. Century of Humiliation as well as communist revolution history museums has better public infrastructure, with some of them having their own metro stations, such as the Guangzhou Uprising Museum. These all made crucial factors to whether these patriotic fieldtrips would be likened by China's students.

These museum spaces reflects the government's intention to reverse a shaken Chinese identity after the Century of Humiliation, and utilize museum education to promote an official ideology of an ambitious rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.



Figure 2: A national education activity center at the end of the exhibition at Guangzhou Uprising Museum. Books and activity worksheets were available and supposedly used during scheduled group activities.



Figure 3: Oath of Allegiance to the Chinese Communist Party at the Shenzhen Archives Centre Exhibition Hall. This archive has relatively slackened rules despite its grandeur.

Encouragement of Self-Initiated Patriotism

Many facilities and activities encourage students and visitors to develop their own unconditional love for the country in their own ways. It acknowledges that genuine patriotism cannot be forced, but rather needs to be nurtured through experiences, knowledge, and personal reflection. Students are also encouraged to visit in a group so as to bond with their peers, share their experiences, and further deepen their connection to the country's history.

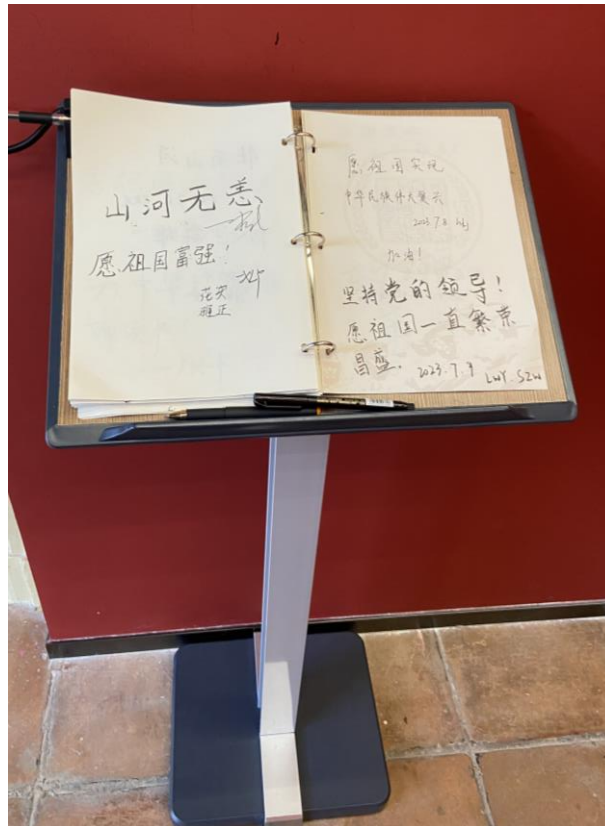


Figure 4: Visitors comments book at the end of the exhibition at Guangzhou Uprising Museum, some of them reads:

‘May the mountains and rivers stay steady’ – a Chinese idiom meaning wishes for a stable country

‘May the motherland be strong and prosper’; ‘May the motherland achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’

‘Maintain the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party’

Distinct Narratives Delivered to Chinese Citizens and Foreign Tourists

Not every museum provided descriptions in the English language, especially those dedicated to communist revolution history. English descriptions, often directed at an international audience, had their descriptive meanings sometimes distinct from the Chinese ones, and some occasionally absent for certain detailed descriptions and statements.

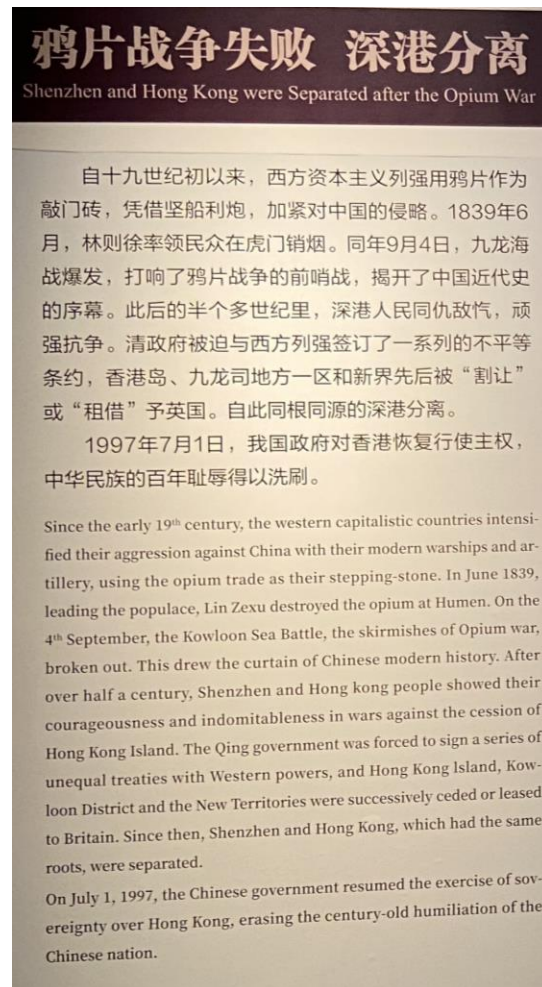


Figure 5: Description of Separation of Hong Kong and Shenzhen after the Opium War at Nanshan Museum. An example of difference in Chinese and English descriptions. The Chinese version emphasizes the separation of Hong Kong and Shenzhen compatriots for a century. The English version highlights the unjust acts of colonialism.

Conclusion

This research provided interesting insights to contemporary Chinese state museum mechanisms to engineer Chinese self-identity and nationalism. It did not consult a wide scope of primary sources, neither did it contribute much to our academic understanding of contemporary China. Yet, this provided a massive training opportunity to conduct in-person primary research, which will contribute to my further training as a researcher.

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Primary Materials

1. Archival Materials

Archives of Macao

Guangdong Provincial Archives, Guangzhou

Guangzhou National Archives

Shenzhen Archives Centre

2. Museums

Humen Opium War Museum

Guangzhou Uprising Museum

Guangzhou Railway Museum

Nanshan Museum, Shenzhen

Thirteen Hongs Museum, Guangzhou

Zhuhai Museum

Zhuhai Revolution Historical Data Exhibition Hall

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