The power of history: How a victimization narrative shapes national identity and public opinion in China

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Abstract
We study the effect of a victimization narrative on national identity and public opinion in China experimentally. Previous research has suggested that governments can shape public opinion by guiding citizens’ collective memories of historical events, but few studies have established a clear causal link. By conducting an online survey experiment among 1890 urban Chinese citizens, we examine the causal impact of historical narratives on political attitudes. We find that, compared to control conditions, a narrative focusing on China’s humiliating past in the late Qing significantly reinforces respondents’ attachment to the victim side of the Chinese national identity, raises suspicion of the intention of foreign governments in international disputes, stimulates preference for more hawkish foreign policies, and strengthens support for China’s current political system. These effects are particularly strong among respondents without a college degree.

Keywords
historical narrative, collective memory, victimization, nationalism, national identity, public opinion, foreign policy

Introduction
Information manipulation is a common tool used by autocratic governments to build public support (Guriev and Treisman, 2019). These governments often invest significant resources into the production and dissemination of official messages through various media platforms such as radio, television, newspapers, and social media (Adena et al., 2015; Carter and Carter, 2021; King et al., 2017; Pan et al., 2020). Research has shown that propaganda in autocratic regimes can be effective in shaping public preferences and behavior or signals the government’s ability to suppress opposition (Huang, 2015). However, there is disagreement among researchers about the mechanisms through which propaganda influences public opinion: Some believe that propaganda strengthens political support by convincing the public of a regime’s merits (Jowett and O’donnell, 2018) or by hiding inconvenient truths (Wallace, 2022), while others argue that it can distract from mass dissatisfaction by setting agendas and framing issues (McCombs and Valenzuela, 2020), or lead to preference falsification, thus hindering collective action against the regime (Kuran, 1991).

In this paper, we argue that autocratic governments can cultivate political support and shape policy preferences by strengthening national identity through the use of victimization narratives. These narratives construct a collective memory of the nation’s historical victimization and are often used by autocracies to legitimize their rule. Researchers have documented the use of victimization narratives in many authoritarian countries around the world. For instance, Russian President Vladimir Putin has blamed the West for the impoverished state of the Russian population (Tsyaankov, 2012). In Hungary, Holocaust museums construct a narrative in which
the Hungarians are not responsible for the persecution of Jewish citizens but are instead portrayed as victims of Nazi and Soviet occupations (Sik, 2015). Similarly, in Serbia, history textbooks depict the country as a victim, causing citizens to remember the misery inflicted upon it while forgetting the suffering inflicted by the Serbian state on others. These narratives serve to shift blame and create a common enemy, uniting the population behind the autocratic government (Subotic, 2013).

We focus on the use of a victimization narrative, the “century of humiliation,” in China. Using an online survey experiment conducted among 1890 urban Chinese citizens, we show that, compared to the control conditions, the victimization narrative strengthens attachments to the victim side of the Chinese national identity, increases suspicion of the intentions of foreign governments in international disputes, stimulates a preference for more hawkish foreign policies, and strengthens support for China’s current political system. These effects are particularly strong among respondents without a college degree.

Our paper makes several contributions. First, we provide causal evidence that an autocratic government can shape national identity and influence public opinion by constructing a narrative that emphasizes a nation’s humiliating past. Second, while scholars have recognized the role of collective memory in strengthening national identity (Gillis, 1994), few have distinguished between different types of national identity (Woods and Dickson, 2017). Our work begins to address this gap by identifying the unique effects of a victimization narrative on the victim and patriotic sides of national identity. Lastly, our paper also sheds light on how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) can use the victimization narrative as a means of legitimization. A number of observers also noted that the “China Dream” of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation stems from a deep sense of shame. Political psychologists have identified several different elements of national identity. One common model, proposed by Kosterman and Feshbach (1989), divides national identity into two main components: patriotic sentiment, which reflects feelings of attachment and affection for one’s country, and nationalistic sentiment, which involves a belief in the superiority or dominance of one’s country over others—we call it victim sentiment to distinguish it from national identity. This victim mentality can lead to a defensive and anti-foreign attitude, while patriotic sentiment is expressed as pride and love for China as a nation. Historical narratives that emphasize past accomplishments can enhance patriotic sentiment (Jager, 2016), while an emphasis on victimization can foster resentment toward out-groups and a desire to restore national dignity (Fukuyama, 2018).

The two components of national identity can have different effects on political attitudes and policy preferences. According to social identity theory, people are motivated to maintain a positive image of their own group, and to evaluate themselves favorably in comparison to out-groups (Abrams and Hogg, 2006). The need to protect self-esteem can lead people to denigrate out-groups in order to defend their own group identity. At the same time, a belief in shared group goals can foster solidarity and cohesion within a group (Tajfel, 2010). In the context of national identity, scholars have found that individuals with stronger patriotic love for their country are more likely to trust their government (Tang, 2016), while those with stronger nationalistic beliefs tend to show more hostile attitudes toward other countries (Shi et al., 2011). Exposure to nationalist information can also increase anger and anti-foreign sentiment (Mattingly and Yao, 2020). As collective memory plays a key role in shaping national identity and public opinion, states often take steps to shape how people remember the past (Assmann, 1998). Education, in particular, is a common tool for fostering a sense of belonging and national identity in young people during their formative years (Darden and Grzymala-Busse, 2006). Additionally, museums, popular culture, and national holidays can also help reinforce collective memory and national identity (Callahan, 2006). We summarize the relationships of the five key concepts in Figure 1.

Forging national identity through collective memory

Collective memory is a shared perspective on historical events within a community (Hirst and Manier, 2008). Unlike history, which aims to provide an objective account of the past, collective memory focuses on the perspective of a specific social group (Halbwachs, 1992). Collective memory often involves the construction of a narrative about the past that may omit certain facts in favor of others (Halbwachs, 1992), and is crucial in shaping people’s identities and the identity of a group or nation (Olick et al., 2011). At the national level, shared memories serve as a powerful tool in shaping how citizens remember past events and can have a significant impact on national identity (Gillis, 1994).

The century of humiliation and boxer rebellion

In the case of China, national identity is shaped by a strong sense of shame and victimhood stemming from the country’s history of foreign invasion and domination (Woods and Dickson, 2017). Our study examines the narrative around the “century of humiliation,” a term referring to the period of foreign invasion and subjugation of China from the start of the First Opium War in 1840 to the founding of the People’s
Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. During this time, China suffered a series of military defeats at the hands of Western powers, leading to major concessions, including large reparations, the opening of ports for trade, and the leasing or ceding of territories such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao.

However, victimization narratives did not become a salient part of the PRC ideology until the 1990s, despite the presence of discourses of national humiliation in the late Qing and early 20th century (Gries, 2004). Figure 2 shows our analysis of the victimization narrative in People’s Daily, China’s largest official newspaper, from 1946 to 2015. Prior to the mid-1990s, the victimization narrative hardly ever appeared.

Between the founding of the PRC in 1949 and Mao’s death in 1976, China’s official historical narrative primarily focused on domestic enemies, such as landlords and capitalists, rather than foreign invasions or humiliations. During this time, the CCP promoted a “victor narrative,” which blamed national humiliation on the corrupt and incompetent Qing Court, as well as the nationalist Kuomintang (Wang, 2008). It was not until after the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests that the victimization narrative became the official narrative of Chinese modern history. On 9 June 1989, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping reflected on the roots of the legitimacy crisis and concluded that “during the last ten years our 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.” China needed a new ideology to replace the class-struggle ideology that was shattered at the end of the Cultural Revolution. Shortly after, in 1993, all students in China were required to take patriotic education classes. A key change in the education content was a shift from the “victor” narrative to the “victim” narrative, which attributed China’s humiliating past to foreign aggression (Wang, 2008). By making China the victim of Western imperialism, the victimization narrative identified the West as the outgroup responsible for China’s suffering (Gries, 2004).

We use the Boxer Rebellion (义和团运动) one important event from this “century of humiliation” narrative, to construct the treatment conditions. The Boxer Rebellion was a violent uprising that occurred in China between 1899 and 1901 and named after the members of the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists (义和拳) a militant group who believed they were invulnerable to foreign weapons and initially targeted foreign missionaries and Christian converts. The rebellion ultimately turned into a broader attack on foreign objects and ended with a violent suppression and the signing of the Boxer Protocol, which included reparations equal to nearly 6 years of the Qing government’s revenues. Western observers refer to the rebels as “Boxers” while the CCP portrays the rebellion as a patriotic and heroic movement. In the early 2000s, several Chinese historians openly challenged the factual basis of the official narrative regarding the rebellion (e.g., Lei, 2000; Yuan, 2006).

**Experimental design**

To evaluate the impact of the victimization narrative on national identity and policy preferences, we conduct an online survey experiment. Using a quota sampling strategy based on gender, age, education, and region, we obtain a diverse sample of 1890 urban Chinese citizens. Our experiment first records the respondents’ individual characteristics, such as education and income, as well as ideological predispositions using questions from Pan and Xu (2018). Respondents then read randomly assigned vignettes from one control and three treatment conditions, before answering questions about national identity and policy preferences. We briefly describe the treatment and control conditions below.

**Treatment and control conditions**

The experiment includes three treatment conditions. The first two treatments examine the impact of different historical narratives on the Boxer Rebellion. The first treatment is in line with the victimization narrative. It uses excerpts from secondary school textbooks on Chinese history that
depict the Boxer Rebellion as a legitimate and heroic movement. This narrative intentionally avoids mentioning the violence and damage caused by the Boxers, and presents a positive view of the rebellion. The second treatment condition uses excerpts from articles by Chinese historians that provide a more balanced and more complete portrait of the event (Lei, 2000; Yuan, 2006). These excerpts highlight the negative impact of the Boxer Rebellion, including the violence and damage caused by the Boxers.

To distinguish the type of national identity that drives political attitudes, we introduce a third treatment aimed at highlighting the patriotic component of the national identity. This treatment is a news report about China’s national women’s volleyball team winning the 2016 Olympic gold medal. We chose this vignette for two reasons: First, it does not directly reference history, so people are less likely to be reminded of China’s humiliating past. Second, the Chinese women’s volleyball team embodies patriotic “women’s volleyball spirit” that resonates with many Chinese since the 1980s.6 The control condition is an article on interior design, which serves as a benchmark for comparison. Respondents then proceed to answer questions we use to construct the outcome variables. Throughout the paper, we use regressions to adjust for pretreatment covariates and obtain estimates of the average treatment effect (compared with the control condition) and use Huber White robust standard errors to quantify uncertainties.

Results

The victimization narrative evokes victim sentiments

We present the full regression results in table formats in Section 5 of the SM. Figure 3 shows regression estimates of treatment effects on the Chinese national identity adjusting for pretreatment covariates. It shows that the victimization narrative shifts respondents’ attachment to the victim side of the Chinese national identity by about 0.13 standard deviations. The Olympic treatment also increases victim sentiments likely because the victim mentality is deeply entrenched among many respondents, though the effect is not statistically significant at the 5% level. In contrast, patriotic sentiments remain unaffected by different stimuli. The victimization narrative strengthens the belief that foreign countries will continue to exploit China and humiliation from foreign powers marked China’s modern history. The finding provides evidence that the effect of the victimization narrative on people’s attachment to victim sentiments is a major force driving public opinion. A causal mediation analysis confirms the importance of victim sentiments in mediating political attitudes. There is no mediation effect associated with patriotic sentiments. (See Figures A1 and A2 in the Supplementary Materials for details).

In addition, we examine pre-registered heterogeneous treatment effects to understand which subgroup is more susceptible to the century of humiliation narrative. We find

Figure 2. Mentioning of the “Century of Humiliation” in the People’s Daily (1946–2015).

Note: This figure shows the percentage of articles in the People’s Daily mentioning the victimization narrative from 1946 to 2015. Keywords include “century of humiliation” (百年屈辱) “century of national humiliation” (百年国耻) and “do not forget national humiliation” (勿忘国耻).
that the victimization narrative has a stronger effect among respondents without a college degree. The victimization narrative increases victim sentiment among individuals without a college degree by 0.2 standard deviations (see Figure 4). In contrast, evoking memories of national humiliation does not strengthen victim sentiments among college-educated respondents. This may be because people who are more educated have greater access to a wider range of information, making them more likely to know about opinions other than the official narrative. Education may also make individuals more critical and less susceptible to media influence. We find similar patterns with other outcomes (see below).

The victimization narrative triggers anti-foreign attitudes

Does activating memories of national humiliation increase anti-foreign sentiment? Figure 5 shows that the victimization narrative heightens individuals’ suspicion of foreign governments’ intention in international disputes. Recipients of the victimization narrative are more likely to view foreign actions as attempts to slow China’s rise, rather than legitimate moves to protect national interests. The victimization narrative raises suspicion of foreign intentions across four issue areas, and contributes to an increase in support for more hawkish foreign policies, particularly with respect to the US–China trade dispute and U.S. sanctions against Huawei. Instead of promoting cooperation or negotiation, evoking memories of national humiliation strengthens public preference for retaliation. The Olympic treatment has smaller and marginally significant effects.

Subgroup analyses show that compared with college graduates, the victimization narrative and the Olympic treatment lead to more antagonistic views of foreign intentions among people without a college degree (Figure 6). Less educated respondents are also more likely to support hawkish government responses to foreign actions when primed with the victimization narrative. For respondents with college degrees or higher, none of the treatment conditions have a statistically significant effect on foreign policy preferences.

The victimization narrative strengthens regime support among the less educated

We then move on to examine the effect of the victimization narrative on political support. Figure 7 shows that recalling memories of national humiliation only strengthens support for the Chinese political system among respondents without college degrees. Despite showing a small average effect in our sample, we expect the victimization narrative to have a substantial effect on public support for the Chinese political system because 41% of our online participants have post-secondary education, compared to only 7% of the Chinese population (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018).

Robustness checks

We conduct robustness checks by restricting the sample based on different conditions and report the findings in the SM. These conditions include emotions experienced after reading the vignette, agreement with the vignette, understanding of the argument of the vignette, and time spent on the survey. We find that individuals who agree with the victimization narrative exhibit stronger treatment effects. Other results remain qualitatively the same as our main findings.

Despite valid concerns about preference falsification in authoritarian regimes, we believe that it does not invalidate our findings. If people were under high pressure to express pro-regime attitudes, we would expect to see
similar conformity biases across outcome variables. However, this is not observed in our results. Falsifying preferences may lead people to show more patriotic love for their country, but the treatments we use largely do not affect patriotic sentiment and are more effective on victim sentiment. It is also unclear how preference falsification would contribute to more aggressive attitudes toward foreign countries.

**Discussion**

Our research suggests that a victimization narrative propagated by an autocratic government may have been effective in provoking anger toward foreign countries while boosting domestic support. However, an excessive focus on victimization may weaken foreign relations and lead to a public opinion crisis that works against the government. Previous research has shown that an angry public motivated by a strong
national identity can protest against government inaction when the government prefers softer foreign policies (Weiss, 2014). A society can be seriously damaged by nationalistic fervor, as the Boxers did in the early 20th century.

More research is needed to shed light on whether our findings can be extended to other countries or contexts. We conjecture that this likely depends on how dominant such a narrative is in a society. Since most people do not witness historical events that took place long ago, and for those who do, their memories can be suppressed and their voices silenced, an authoritarian government is in a unique position to tell its citizens what happened in the past (Zerubavel, 1995). A monopoly on media and authoritarian control over the education system can significantly facilitate the spread of the official narrative (e.g., Callahan, 2006; Liu and Ma, 2018), while in democratic societies, a free press, as well as

**Figure 6.** Effects on perception of intention and support for hawkish policies by education. Note: These figures show the treatment effects on the respondents’ perception of malicious foreign intention and support for hawkish foreign policy by educational level.

**Figure 7.** Treatment effects on support for the political system. Note: This figure shows the treatment effects on the respondents’ support for the domestic political system.
mechanisms of checks and balances, allows for alternative narratives that challenge the official one.

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Supplemental Material
Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes
1. For example, Chinese President Xi Jinping said in a speech that “only by understanding the nation’s history of humiliation after the Opium War can one understand the Chinese people’s strong yearning for national rejuvenation.” See “Xi lauds Macao’s ‘shining chapter’ of ‘one country, two systems’ practice.” People’s Daily, 2019. https://bit.ly/3GZFisr (accessed May 26, 2021).


5. See Sections A.1, A.2, and A.3 in Supplementary Materials (SM) for translations of the vignettes, our measurement strategy, and more details about the sample, respectively. Our experimental design was pre-registered with EGAP (20190223AB) and approved by the Institutional Review Board at UCSD (180236S).


References


