

University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012


China Beat Archive

4-22-2009

It's Just History: Patriotic Education in the PRC

Julia Lovell
London University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

Lovell, Julia, "It's Just History: Patriotic Education in the PRC" (2009). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 357.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/357>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

It's Just History: Patriotic Education in the PRC

April 22, 2009 in Uncategorized by [The China Beat](#) | 17 comments

By Julia Lovell

It's now a year since Chinese nationalism had its last big public outing. On April 19, 2008, twelve days after pro-Tibet protesters in Paris tried to grab the Olympic flame from a wheelchair-bound Chinese paralympian, patriotic civilians began mobilising protests around the French embassy in Beijing, and outside Carrefours in at least four different Chinese cities. "Protect Our Tibet! Bless Our Olympics! Boycott Carrefour!" declared banners at demonstrations on the northeast coast. "Say No to French Imperialists!"

As popular outrage grew about perceived anti-Chinese bias in Western reporting on the riots in Tibet and opposition to the torch relay, more than ten members of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China are said to have received death threats. "People who fart through the mouth will get shit stuffed down their faces by me!", "Foreign reporters out of China!" [two postings on a popular news site](#) owned by the *People's Daily* pronounced. "These bastards make me want to throw up," ran another. "Throw them in the Taiwan Strait to fill it up. They're like flies – disgusting."

Although the content of the rage wasn't new, its distribution had a certain novelty. As it travelled through the opposed ranks of the pro-Tibet and pro-China lobbies in France, England, the U.S. and Australia, the torch relay turned Chinese nationalism into a headline story in these countries' media. Those without firsthand experience of or interest in China now encountered (either physically or on primetime news slots) files of red-flag wavers occasionally prepared to kick and punch advocates of Tibetan independence. Things looked particularly ugly in clashes between Chinese and pro-Tibetan demonstrators at Duke University in the U.S., where one Chinese student who suggested dialogue between the two sides received death threats from compatriots. It was not a good PR moment for the PRC. For a while – until the Sichuan earthquake revived global sympathy for China – dyspeptic chauvinism jostled to become the international face of this imminent superpower.

Various explanations have been put forward for the surge in anti-Western nationalism since 1989. One is straightforwardly cyclical: as economic confidence grew, the reasoning goes, early post-Mao China's love affair with the West was bound to founder at some point. Another is hormonal: the "angry youth" (*fenqing*) who dominate contemporary Chinese nationalism, some argue, need *something* to get mad at – they'll grow out of it. Twenty years ago, today's *fenqing* would have been protesting against rats in their dorms and lack of democracy; go back another twenty years, and they would have been Red Guards.

But the most convincing gloss on today's patriotic distemper presents it as a substantially state-engineered phenomenon, rooted in one of the Communist Party's most successful post-Mao political crusades: Patriotic Education. Searching for a new state religion around which the country could rally after the bloodshed of 1989, the Party skilfully reinvented itself through the 1990s as defender of the national interest against Western attempts to contain a rising China. To dislodge the worship of the West that had helped foment much of the unrest leading up to 1989, successive Patriotic Education campaigns waged in textbooks, newspapers, films and monuments drew concerted attention to China's "century of humiliation" (c. 1840-1949) inflicted by foreign imperialism, always beginning with the Opium Wars, always passing slickly over the CCP's own acts of violence (most notably the manmade famine of the early 1960s; the Cultural Revolution; the 1989 crackdown).

Post-1989 China has bristled with new or improved tourist destinations commemorating the horrors of foreign aggression (the Memorial Hall of the Nanjing Massacre; the rebranding of the Yuanmingyuan as national wound; the redevelopment of an Opium War heritage trail around Guangzhou and Nanjing). Two or three years ago, the government even moved to replace the soporific lectures in Marxism-Leninism compulsory across undergraduate courses with classes in post-1840 Chinese history, ensuring that China's brightest and best emerged from their university careers with a correct understanding of the past, and its relationship to the present. The textbook used for this course at Beijing University helpfully summarises the ongoing uses of the "century of humiliation" for China's Communist establishment:

"The story of China's modern history [from the Opium War to the present day] is the history of the courageous, agonising struggle by generation upon generation of the good-hearted masses for national survival and to accomplish the great revival of the Chinese race...It is the history of an extremely weak, impoverished and old China gradually growing, thanks to the socialist revolution...into a prosperous, flourishing and vital new socialist China...What are the aims of studying our modern history? To gain deep insights into how the invasion of foreign capitalism and imperialism combined with Chinese feudal authority to bring terrible suffering to the Chinese nation and people...and how history and the people came to choose the Chinese Communist Party."^[1]

With its regimen of flag-raising, anthem-singing, film-watching, textbook-reading, museum-visiting and so on, post-1989 Patriotic Education has offered a full-body workout for China's growing generations of potential nationalists. "Our schooling taught us that China's misery was imposed by Western countries," observed one 23-year-old in 2006. "We were all strongly nationalist...We were bound to become *fengqing*." The campaign seems at times to have been successful beyond the government's wildest dreams, its messages spilling subversively beyond the limits defined by the CCP. Two days after the French protests erupted last year, the Chinese authorities swiftly moved to dampen their ardour. "It's good your hearts are patriotic," one group of fledgling anti-Tibetan-independence demonstrators were told by Public Security, "but you can't compromise social order and traffic flow."

I wanted to try and take the temperature of Patriotic Education: to see whether it really was manufacturing furious chauvinists. So I decided to have a look at a couple of its prime tourist destinations in south and east China: first, Guangdong's Sea Battle Museum (*Haizhan bowuguan*), recounting British gunboats' 1841 destruction of the crucial forts that guarded the riverway up to Guangzhou; and second, Nanjing's Museum of the Nanjing Treaty (*Nanjing tiaoyue shiliao chenlieguan*), which reconstructs the site on which the closing negotiations of the Opium War took place. Both are offspring of the post-1989 nation-building project, opened or refurbished between 1990 and 1999; both commemorate key engagements in the Opium War – the conflict which remains, in PRC public history, the founding myth of modern Chinese nationalism and the inauguration of the "century of humiliation" that ends, inevitably, with Communist triumph in 1949.



The Sea Battle Museum is a great barnacle of a building, rising out of the stretch of Guangdong coastline stormed by the British in early 1841. Buses and taxis have to park in a seafront car-park about a kilometer away, leaving tourists to approach on foot down a narrow road and through a large, open square of scrubby parkland. Maybe the theory was to give visitors a slow lead-in during which to reflect soberly on the tragedies of the past; but on the day that I was there, the houses along the way

were festooned irreverently with washing lines of multicoloured underwear. Across some eight exhibition rooms, the museum's interior tells a simple, unhappy tale familiar to most veterans of PRC high-school history classes: of "a conspiracy of the British bourgeoisie" to enslave China through opium and violence, fervently and unanimously opposed by the masses.

"The British colonialists directed their aggression at China, attempting to open the door of China by the contemptible means of armed invasion and opium smuggling...It was an invasive war launched by the British to protect their illegal opium trade and colonial expansion. Facing the invaders with hard ships and sharp weapons, the Chinese people were not afraid but bravely resisted...the sublime national integrity and great patriotic spirit of the Chinese people displayed during the anti-aggression struggle showed a national spirit that would never disappear. And it has been encouraging the Chinese people one generation after another to make a sustained effort for the prosperity of the nation...With their blood and lives they upheld the national dignity."

In addition to composing instructive captions, the museum's curators have indulged in some three-dimensional artists' impressions of the struggle. One's attention is grabbed particularly by a lurid waxworks of the fight for one of the forts, in which an unarmed Chinese man has wrestled to the ground an armed and apparently moribund British soldier, and is about to dash his brains out with a rock. In the style of First and Second World War memorials in Europe, the walls of the last room are given over to displaying the names of the fallen in the various Opium War battles.

I wondered what its other visitors were making of it. (I was there on a slow weekday, but a smiling young museum attendant told me the museum got around 300,000 visitors a year, many of them bussed-in schoolchildren.) Two-thirds of the way round, I entered a large semi-circular auditorium filled with a mock-up of the main naval battle – complete with flashing lights (to simulate cannon-fire) and booming voiceover (to emphasize the lessons of history). Perhaps to make the story more stirring, the sound editor seemed to have added a touch of reverb to the narration, meaning that I lost words here and there, even if the general message was clear enough.

As the display ended and the gathered listeners trudged out, I turned to the man next to me and asked for a couple of points of clarification: "What was that again? The bit about tragic decline strengthening the Chinese people's determination to rebuild...what?" He gazed vaguely back at me, as if awakening from a deep dream. Rather unfairly, I decided to test him further on a basic historical detail thoroughly expounded upon by the museum: "So if the Qing had all these forts and guns, how come the British won?" He paused to think, then muttered something about the gunpowder. "The gunpowder?" "Yes, it was...stronger." "Stronger, how?" "Stronger...more effective." Just behind me, I heard a man commenting to his wife, "so that was patriotic education." At a pause in their conversation, I asked them what it meant to them; they looked curiously at me. "It's just...patriotic education," the man replied, moving towards the exit.

Outside, daytrippers seemed to be having even greater difficulty getting upset about events of almost 170 years past. The museum gives onto a sandy shore, lapped at by a soupy green sea. Although no-one looked too keen on swimming, the mood that humid spring day was about enjoying a few hours at the seaside, not solemn contemplation of the national tragedy, as tourists laid out snacks and drinks, threw balls around and kicked shuttlecocks in the shadow of the forts that failed to protect China from British ships. The largest and most accessible of the fortifications was Weiyuan Paotai (the Fort That Overawes To a Great Distance) just to the right of the beach: a long, fortified seawall regularly punctuated by large cannon, several of which were being straddled (without a conscious whisper of suggestiveness) by young women in tight shorts who were having their photographs taken.

I tried asking a young man who was standing apart, watching his male friends scramble over the guns, what he felt visiting the place: "I...er...don't know. I haven't thought." I tried goading him a little: "I'm British, you know." "Really? I hear Britain's very advanced." I gave him an extra gloss on the concept: "British as in 'The Anti-British Invasion Museum' [another site of Opium War-period patriotic education in Guangzhou, sadly shut for refurbishment when I was passing by]. Wouldn't you like me to apologise?" "Oh, that. That's just history."



I headed up to a couple of the other forts, nestling amid the wooded cliffs that rise up over the sea. "It's awfully far," I was discouraged five minutes into my ascent by a young man in combat gear whom I met taking a rest on the steps. "I wouldn't bother." When I panted to the top after only another brisk 10 minutes' walk, I struggled to reconstruct the battle scene in my mind's eye – but the garish rows of orange-roofed condominiums that dominated the landscape were a distraction. Slightly less out of breath on my way down, I asked the young man in combat what he thought of the place: was he here for the patriotic education? "I can get that over there if I want." He nodded in the direction of the museum. "I come up here for the peace." He seemed a nice young man, and looked at me only a little bit pointedly.

I made my way back to a taxi. Given how commercially-minded so much of China is, I was surprised by the lack of shopping opportunities around the place. Any decent heritage destination in Britain these days is awash with tie-in tat: postcards, key-rings, paperweights, bookmarks etc. I browsed the handful of stalls near the car-park, hoping to find a rubber model of a British imperialist impaled on the righteous souvenir pencil of the people, at the very least. I discovered nothing more patriotic than strings of plastic-looking local shells. The only battle-themed money-spinner was a row of three toy cannons by the seafront; about ten metres out to sea, four or five small, harmless toy animals were suspended in a perpendicular net opposite – ten *yuan* for four potshots. Business looked slow, so a man and woman lounging by looked very excited as I approached; they were less excited when I told them I just wanted to ask a couple of questions. What do they think of the place? "So-so. It passes the time." A couple of late-middle-aged ladies sitting nearby stopped chatting to take a great interest in me. Where am I from, they wanted to know. Britain, I answered hopefully. "You have such beautiful skin!" they told me (I don't). "How old are you? Do you have children?" I gave them both these pieces of information. "So young!" (I'm not.) As I got back into the taxi, I inflicted my final leading question on my taxi driver, asking his opinion of the museum. He was outraged: "Three *yuan* for a bread roll! They rip you off at these tourist spots. It would be no more than one and a half, maximum two elsewhere."

A few days later I visited the Museum of the Nanjing Treaty, part of a 2,100-square-metre complex of pavilion-like buildings spread across the grounds of the temple in which China's first "unequal treaty" was signed on 29 August 1842. The site itself was reconstructed in time for the 150th anniversary of the war in 1990; in 1997, to mark the Handover of Hong Kong, some 6,000,000 *yuan* in public subscriptions were collected to pay for the forging of a massive "Bell of Warning," which now stood at the entrance of the complex: "to peal long and loud, lest we forget the national humiliation [a term that crops up about six times through a relatively small exhibition space] of the past century."

As with the Sea Battle Museum, the three-story museum's account of the Opium War speaks the pure, clear dialect of national grievance: "In June 1840, Great Britain (the vanguard of those Western

colonisers who wanted to expand to the East) extended its aggressors' claws from India and Singapore and outrageously launched a war against the Chinese...In 1842, British troops invaded up to Nanjing, forcing the Qing government to negotiate an agreement at this ancient temple. On August 29, the first unequal treaty in China's modern history was signed...The Qing Government was compelled to cede Hong Kong Island to the British and pay them 2.1 million ounces of silver. From then on, China was progressively carved up and reduced to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society." After two floors of vicious imperialism, however, a happy ending: the third and final story recounts the euphoric return of Hong Kong to the motherland, illustrated by photographs of the masses (students, primary school children, generals, pop stars) pledging to "wash away national humiliation". There is also a tasteful exhibit of a large commemorative vase gleefully emblazoned with a photograph of the wife and daughters of the last Governor, Chris Patten, weeping into their hands as they watch the handover.

So far, so furious; but the message still seemed to be failing to have much of an impact on its visitors. Admittedly, I was harassed a little as I walked around. First, there was the mother of a six-year-old having a calligraphy lesson next door to the museum who, while she was washing out his brushes in an outside sink, smilingly told me she was still very angry about the Opium War; a few minutes later she pursued me into the museum dragging her son along to have him say hello to me in English. Then there was the slightly unnerving man in the museum itself who followed me around as I wrote down inscriptions, occasionally asking questions like "How many floors does the museum have?" and who was very insistent that I write down his email address so that we could continue chatting about nothing very much on the internet. The museum attendants were too busy washing clothes or their lunch bowls to respond to my questions about their views. In the end, I ambled back out again, to look at the Bell of Warning at the front.

The ground floor of the building that housed it was yet another missed souvenir opportunity: a small shop selling random, unpatriotic odds-and-ends. The manager (or its only member of sales personnel, at least) was having a cup of tea with a friend; he invited me to sit down and chat while I waited for a sudden rainstorm to pass. I asked them which parts of China's modern history they felt most needed commemorating: they suggested the Opium War and May Fourth. I wondered aloud if there were any parts of Chinese history after 1949, for example, that also needed public remembrance: "Too many, too many. It's too painful." As the shopkeeper looked away, I searched among the bric-a-brac for something to buy. The best thing I could find was a bronze coin that claimed to be from the Opium War period; doubtless fake but I took it anyway, as girlie playing cards seemed just about the only other choice on offer.

Despite its apparent contribution to nurturing nationalism, China's patriotic education, I suppose, is not all that different from the government's other ideological campaigns: a little like white noise, with its audiences tuning out whenever they can. In autumn 2007, I sat in on some of the new compulsory Modern History classes at Beijing University (I was particularly impressed by one lecturer who succeeded in speaking about May Fourth for two hours without making a single mention of any foreign influences except Communism). Soon, the only way in which I could keep myself awake was by sitting at the back and keeping a count on all the students who had obviously fallen asleep (some of them in the front rows).

The safest conclusion to draw is that there is still no such thing as public opinion in China today. For all the success of young Chinese nationalists in periodically grandstanding Western media coverage, almost every Chinese urbanite I have spoken to is embarrassed by them, refusing to admit they represent the mainstream. As I think back over the time I have spent in China over the past decade, the public expressions of anti-Western feeling that began in the second half of the 1990s strike me as anomalies; the country is at present more open to (and dependent on) global forces than at any other time in its long history of engagement with the world beyond its borders. Few Chinese people seem to waste much time gnashing their teeth over Western aggression when they are left alone by Patriotic Education. When I've asked Beijing taxi-drivers (an overworked, underpaid labour-force more than entitled to a generalized sense of grievance against the world) what they think of Britain, they've responded with sighs of admiration (about how modern and developed Britain is, relative to China) rather than vitriolic expletives. When I've asked them about the Opium War, they've answered

that what's past is past; they're too busy thinking about managing in the present (and anyway, who listens to anything the government says?).

And significant numbers of China's angriest cyber-nationalists – denouncers of China's "victimization" at the hands of the West and Japan – rank among the most enthusiastic exploiters of the wealth and opportunities generated by the opening up of post-Mao China to the outside world. A joke circulating in 1999 reported that demonstrators outside the US embassy in Beijing were lobbing into the compound stones wrapped in visa applications. Interviews I have attempted to conduct with committed patriots have often been derailed by their earnest requests for advice about studying or getting published in the West. In one transcript, my interlocutor's impassioned speech on his readiness to send his army to the British Museum to recover the treasures looted from the Summer Palace is interrupted when he enthusiastically accepts a complimentary cup of Christmas coffee from a Starbucks waitress. Pragmatism, not patriotism, is the religion of the contemporary PRC. When I asked a Beijing novelist a few weeks back what he made of the protests last year, he advised me not to believe anything anyone says in China; they're only in it for the money or publicity. A little later, in a separate conversation, someone else advised me not to believe anything he says either.

Julia Lovell is a lecturer in Chinese history at London University, and her next book will be a new translation of the complete fiction of Lu Xun, to be published by Penguin Classics later this year.

[i] *Zhongguo jin xiandai shi gangyao* (An outline of China's modern history) (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 2007), 1-2.

Tags: [China Report](#), [Chinese nationalism](#), [Opium War](#)