
**TEARS OF RAGE:
CHINESE NATIONALIST REACTIONS
TO THE BELGRADE EMBASSY BOMBING***

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The US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999 sparked mass protests from Chinese across the globe. Few accepted America's explanation that the bombing (and subsequent death of three Chinese journalists) was a mistake caused by the CIA's use of outdated maps. Chinese students in the United States and Europe demonstrated against what they called "NATO fascism". The American consul's residence in Chengdu was firebombed. In Beijing Chinese students demanded revenge, chanting "Blood for blood!" Others threw bricks at US embassy buildings as People's Liberation Army soldiers looked on, and Ambassador James Sasser and other American diplomats were trapped inside for days.

The demonstrations shocked the US media, which quickly pointed blame at the Chinese government for inflaming the protests. A brief review of major US newspaper editorials of 11 May reveals a consensus view: the Chinese people were not genuinely angry with (innocent) America; they were, rather, manipulated by Communist propaganda that the bombing was intentional. The *San Francisco Chronicle* complained that Beijing "failed to tell its citizens that the U.S. attack was an accident and that President Clinton has apologized to Beijing". The *Washington Post* declared: "The Big Lie is alive and well in Beijing ... It should come as no surprise, after weeks of ... internal propaganda, that many ordinary Chinese now believe the embassy bombing was deliberate". Such "state-supervised anger", the *Boston Globe* declared, was neither genuine nor popular. The "brutes in Beijing" were responsible for the Chinese people's

* I would like to thank Kevin O'Brien, Yu Bin, Phillip Saunders, Jeffrey Wasserstrom, Ben Read, Anita Chan, Jonathan Unger and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions. The research and writing of this article was supported by the Mershon Centre for International Security Studies at the Ohio State University.

mistaken belief that the bombing was intentional. The protests were, it seems, yet another example of the "Communist menace".¹

In this article I argue that the Chinese people's anger and attribution of blame were genuine and understandable, and should not be seen as evidence of an emerging "China threat".² To make this argument, I draw on national narratives of China's early modern victimization at the hands of imperialism and tap current experimental findings in psychology. Narratives about the past have a potent impact on nationalistic feelings today. Tales of the "Century of Humiliation" (*bainian guochi*), which began with the First Opium War and the ceding of Hong Kong to the British in 1842, powerfully shaped the way that Chinese both interpreted and reacted to the Belgrade bombing. Drawing on attribution theory in psychology, I maintain that while the Chinese view that the bombing was intentional is understandable, "ingroup" members tend not to give "outgroup" members the benefit of the doubt. The Western media's obsession with images of Chinese destruction, implicitly suggesting that China went crazy, is untenable. Expressions of anger can serve to restore a healthy self-respect; they are not evidence of a China threat.

What should concern us, instead, is something much subtler. The protests suggest that the embassy bombing promoted a shift in popular Chinese perceptions of America and of the world system. A Manichean, black-and-white view of Sino-American relations appears to have gained a wider currency in post-Belgrade China. Given that a similarly Manichean view of China may be emerging in the United States, these developments threaten to lock Chinese and American national identities into a dangerous state of negative interdependence, where every American gain is perceived as China's loss, and vice versa. The emergence of a zero-sum view of Sino-American relations on both sides of the Pacific would have grave implications for peace in the 21st century.

The political fall-out from the mid-air collision between a US Navy EP-3 surveillance aircraft and a Chinese F-8 fighter jet in April this year suggests that the 1999 Belgrade bombing was indeed a turning point in Sino-American relations. Chinese America-bashers related the incident to the Belgrade bombing and saw it as evidence that Americans were again killing and humiliating Chinese. American China-bashers, meanwhile, pointed to the Belgrade bombing protests to argue that Chinese tyranny was again resurgent. Such rhetoric does not bode well for the Bush administration's relationship with Beijing.

My analysis focuses on a collection of 281 letters, essays and poems e-mailed, faxed and mailed to the *Guangming Daily* newspaper in the hours and days following the Belgrade bombing. The writings were posted on the paper's Web site, which has a special page commemorating Xu Xinghu and Zhu Ying,

¹ "A Belgrade Bombing Explodes in Beijing", *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 May 1999, p. A20; "China's True Colors", *The Washington Post*, 11 May 1999, p. A20; "Defusing the Crisis with China", *The Boston Globe*, 11 May 1999, p. A18.

² A recent example of this view is Bill Gertz, *The China Threat: How the People's Republic Targets America* (Washington DC: Regnery, 2000).

the two *Guangming Daily* reporters who were killed in Belgrade (the third Chinese killed was a Xinhua reporter).³ The *Guangming Daily* is one of China's premier national newspapers and is especially popular among intellectuals. As a whole, the texts agree that the bombing intentionally infringed on Chinese sovereignty and, by extension, insulted Chinese self-respect. Many of the letters and e-mails also discuss specific measures to restore Chinese dignity, from angrily demanding an explanation, apology and compensation to advocating militarization and revenge.

The Sample: The *Guangming Daily*'s Condolence Letters

I focus on this collection of letters for five reasons: (1) the Belgrade bombing's intrinsic importance to an understanding of Chinese nationalism today, (2) the popular, (3) diverse, and (4) sincere nature of the writings, and (5) the centrality of national identity to the texts.

The May 8th protests (named for the date of the bombing) were a high tide in contemporary Chinese nationalism and may even mark a turning point in Chinese attitudes toward the United States and the world system. The pro-Western 1988 television drama *He Shang* (The River Elegy) provided a positive vision of America, a vision that was prevalent in China in the mid- to late 1980s.⁴ Responding to Western sanctions imposed after the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, and capitalizing on the 90th and the 40th anniversary commemorations of the Eight Nation Indemnity Force of 1900 and the onset of the Korean War, respectively, in 1990 the authorities in Beijing tried without much success to whip up anti-Western sentiment. Popular nationalism in China only began to emerge with America's perceived abandonment of Gorbachev and Russia after the fall of the Soviet bloc, and Beijing's loss to Sydney in its 1993 bid to host the 2000 Olympics (attributed to a scheming US Congress).⁵ It gained momentum in 1996-97, with the crisis in the Taiwan Strait and the publication of the book *Zhongguo keyi shuo bu* (China Can Say No) and a host of copycat anti-American

³ The *Guangming Daily*'s home page is <<http://www.gmw.com.cn/>>. The current link to the Xu and Zhu commemorative page is <http://www.gmw.com.cn/2_zhuanfijinian/jnzj/jnzj.htm>, but it changes. The 281 letters are posted in 10 separate text files linked toward the top of the page. All are also available from the author on request.

⁴ For an extended cultural history of the 1980s, see Wang Jing, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

⁵ The 1993 television drama *Beijingren zai Niuyue* (A Beijinger in New York) marked the emergence of a popular anti-American sentiment in China. It contained repeated racist comments about Americans. The show was a hit. See Geremie Barmé, "To Screw Foreigners is Patriotic: China's Avante-garde Nationalists", in Jonathan Unger (ed.), *Chinese Nationalism* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. 183-208. Australian bribery of International Olympic Committee members, notably, was not an issue in China—perhaps because Beijing played the same game, or perhaps because Australia does not capture China's imagination in the same way as America does.

diatribes.⁶ Once thought extreme, the views of “say no” nationalists appear to have gained a wider currency following the Belgrade bombing. “Ouyang from Wuhan”, for instance, sent the *Guangming Daily* a long essay entitled “A Shattered Dream” (letter 8.11).⁷ It begins with the lines:

Another dream has been shattered ...
It was my American dream ...
I have had this dream for over a decade, ever since high school.
America was my dream country.

With the bombing, the writer’s earlier image of America as “a teacher and a friend” changed to one of America as a “scoundrel and a cheat”. If Ouyang’s radical shift in his image of America is at all typical of his compatriots, a closer examination of the bombing protests is vital to any understanding of 21st-century Chinese nationalism.

The condolence letters can be considered a manifestation of popular nationalism. Western academics often dismiss Chinese nationalism as a tool the Communist elite uses to prop up its declining legitimacy. Thomas Christensen expressed this dominant view succinctly in an influential *Foreign Affairs* article: “Since the Chinese Communist Party is no longer communist, it must be even more Chinese”.⁸ There is broad consensus in the West on the fundamental nature of contemporary Chinese nationalism: it is Party propaganda, generated by the elite for its own instrumental purposes. I dispute this top-down view, arguing that we need to bring the people back into our understanding of Chinese nationalism. Unlike many international relations theorists, we should not reduce international politics to interstate relations. Societies matter. Top-down “state nationalism” theories fail to capture the dynamics of nationalist legitimacy played out between elites and the masses. In their efforts to maintain power, China’s leaders have long paid close attention to popular nationalism. Western analysts would be wise to do the same. The *Guangming Daily* condolence letters, I contend, represent genuine Chinese popular opinion and should not be dismissed as mere propaganda.

Third, the condolence letters are a diverse sample from all over China, written by people from a variety of professions and work units (*danwei*). The geographical distribution of the sample is impressive: letters came from at least 26 of China’s 30 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities.⁹ Students

⁶ For an English-language review of the first two “say no” books, see my review in *The China Journal*, No. 37 (January 1997), pp. 180–5.

⁷ I have numbered the letters for easy reference. “Letter 8.11”, for instance, is the 11th letter in the 8th text file (available at: <http://www.gmw.com.cn/2_zhuanti/jinian/jnzj/xzw/36.html>). All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁸ Thomas Christensen, “Chinese Realpolitik”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 5, (September/October 1996), p. 37.

⁹ I was able to trace unidentified letters through e-mail addresses. An otherwise anonymous e-mail from <hwwxmc@public2.zz.ha.cn> (letter 4.8), for instance, argues that “We must

and teachers wrote in from 35 universities: three in the United States, one in Canada, the National Singapore University and institutions throughout China—from the Zhejiang Industrial University to the Jilin Arts Academy (letters 2.8 and 1.9). Three letters came from high school students in Beijing, Wuhan and Ningdu counties, Jiangxi (letters 1.47, 3.32 and 4.16). People who work in the media, the Party-state and the information technology industry were also well represented. Letters came from journalists and editors at 14 regional newspapers (from Xinjiang's *Shihezi News* to the *Three Gorges Daily* [letters 2.31 and 1.43]), three television stations in Henan, Hebei and Canton (letters 1.13, 2.4 and 6.2), and three *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily* and *Xinhua* reporters stationed in Poland, Pakistan and Tokyo, respectively (letters 1.6, 1.38 and 5.8). Seven information technology workers contacted the newspaper, mostly describing how they used their Web sites to publicize the Belgrade bombing or to advocate economic boycotts of American products. An immersion in Chinese popular opinion provides a counterweight to the usual Western dismissals of Chinese nationalism as top-down propaganda.

Often composed in the heat of the moment after hearing news of the deaths, these intensely personal writings seem very sincere, serving as a window into the emotions of the writers, whose anger and grief appear genuine and unaffected. Yue Hongjian writes from Xinjiang province in China's far northwest that he saw the news on television while eating: "I finished dinner with tears in my eyes, and then wrote this poem". His poem is a powerful expression of sorrow (letter 2.39). Su Zhengfan from Beijing writes that he expressed his feelings about the bombing in his diary but found that there was "no way to calm my feelings of grief and indignation" (letter 8.9). He then decided to bare his heart by sending in a few pages of his diary. These texts are more than simply private writings—after all, they were sent as condolence letters to the *Guangming Daily* and were selected by the paper—but they cannot be dismissed as Party propaganda.

In addition to expressing personal grief, the vast majority of letter writers also tell of the outrage that they feel as Chinese. The deaths of the three Chinese increased "mortality salience" (awareness of death), a condition that some social psychologists have found to heighten attachment to valued social identities.¹⁰ The intergroup context and high mortality salience brought to the fore the writers' conceptions of themselves as Chinese (*Zhongguoren*, *Zhonghua minzu*, *YanHuang zisun*, and so on).¹¹ For instance, a high school student, Zhou Yi from

strive to make China a world superpower soon!" Pointing my browser to <<http://www.zz.ha.cn/>>, I discovered that the writer is from Zhengzhou city, Henan province.

¹⁰ See, for example, Emanuele Castano, Y. V. Yzerybyt, M. P. Paladino and S. Sacchi, "I Belong Therefore I Exist: Ingroup Identification, Ingroup Entitativity, and Ingroup Bias", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, forthcoming.

¹¹ Other identities, of course, were invoked as well. Writers describe themselves as "Net-friends" (*wangyou*), "netizens" (*wangmin*) and "citizens" (both *gongmin* and *shimin*). As "journalists", "parents" and "children", various writers also identify themselves with the

Wuhan, sent in a compelling essay (letter 3.32) on Chinese identity entitled "I marched with the University Students":

As a high school student among college students, I thought I would feel lonely, but I felt that I belonged. There were no divisions between male and female, old and young: we were all one family! ... We were all Chinese boys and girls, sons and grandsons of the Han and Huang Emperors ... We are all one family, we are all Chinese!

To be sure, these letters may not be representative of Chinese popular opinion, but their intense expressions of national identity reveal much about the tone of Chinese nationalism.

"It definitely was not an accident !!!"¹²

The letters insist that the United States bombed the Chinese embassy intentionally. Shanghai's Xiong Junfeng, for instance, seeks to correct a matter of diction (letter 4.5):

I believe that we should stop calling NATO's bombing of our embassy a "barbarous act"—a "terrorist act" would be more appropriate. Something "barbaric" stems from ignorance, but American-led NATO's despicable act was clearly premeditated ... This was a terrorist attack through and through.

By contrast, no mainstream Western media source initially took issue with NATO's explanation that the bombing was an accident.¹³ Many Western news articles and editorials did not use the word "bombing" without prefacing it with the qualifier "accidental". That the "accidental bombing" was an accident thus became self-evident.

How can we account for these polar-opposite views, with Chinese certain that the bombing was intentional, and Americans equally sure that it was an accident?

As noted above, the Western media blamed misinformation: the Chinese government, it was claimed, was not letting the Chinese people know about Serbian atrocities in Kosovo (instead painting a picture of NATO "interference" in the "internal politics" of the Yugoslav Federation), and did not report Clinton's public apologies immediately following the bombing. Communist Party

victims and/or their families. But these self-identifications rarely seemed to supercede national identity.

¹² Du Wenlong of the Military Sciences College's War Tactics Institute in Beijing (letter 3.15).

¹³ Over five months later, on 17 October 1999, London's *Observer* did suggest that NATO deliberately bombed the embassy after discovering that it was relaying Yugoslav military radio signals. See John Sweeney and Jens Holsoe, "Nato Bombed Chinese Deliberately", *Observer*, 17 October 1999. My thanks to Yu Bin for this reference. According to Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), the US media reacted to the *Observer* story with a "deafening silence" (see <<http://www.fair.org/activism/embassy.bombing.html>>).

propaganda, in this Western view, explains the Chinese people's mistaken belief that the bombing was intentional.

I agree that the Chinese government manipulated information about the bombing. The problem with the misinformation argument, however, is that numerous Chinese who read the Western press coverage of the Kosovo conflict also believed that the bombing was intentional. Zhao Guojun, a researcher at the University of British Columbia, e-mailed the *Guangming Daily* that he had had a lengthy discussion with several of his compatriots in Vancouver, and that they all agreed that the bombing was of "hostile intent" (letter 3.8). Wang Wei from North Carolina goes further, angrily denouncing the "farce" of the "freedom of the press" in the United States and lamenting that the Western media was "swindling" "ordinary Americans" (letter 6.10). Many Chinese in China also have access to the Western press and radio broadcasts to China and are savvy interpreters of these various media sources. An e-mail from Beijing, for example, notes that the Chinese media "clearly sympathizes with the heroic Serbian resistance", while CNN focuses on atrocities in Kosovo. Having seen both types of news coverage, this self-described "pained and thoughtful Chinese" is certain that the bombing was not a "tragic mistake" (letter 4.10).

"Situationists" and "dispositionists" in psychology have long debated whether external social constraints or internal psychological needs drive human behaviour. In what Thomas Pettigrew called the "ultimate attribution error", and Miles Hewstone has more modestly labelled the "intergroup attribution bias", psychologists have found that we consistently favour ingroups over outgroups when making attributions.¹⁴ Thus if an ingroup member does something good, we attribute it to his or her good disposition; however, if he or she does something bad, we write it off to the social situation beyond the member's control. If a member of an outgroup does something good, conversely, we dismiss it as "luck" or somehow attribute it to the situation (not reflecting well on the outgroup); if an outgroup member does something bad, however, it is surely due to his or her bad disposition, a disposition that has ramifications for the outgroup along with the individual. Out of a desire to view our ingroup as good, in short, we give our fellow ingroup members the benefit of the doubt; but we are not so charitable to outsiders.

Because Americans perceive their leaders as fellow ingroup members (when the intergroup context is US-China relations), Americans could not easily attribute the Belgrade bombing to negative dispositions, instead writing it off to the situation: it was a tragic mistake. Like all peoples, Americans view themselves positively and desire that others view them that way as well. House

¹⁴ Thomas F. Pettigrew, "The Ultimate Attribution Error: Extending Allport's Cognitive Analysis of Prejudice", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1979), pp. 461-76; and Miles Hewstone, "The 'Ultimate Attribution Error'? A Review of the Literature on Intergroup Causal Attribution", *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (1990), pp. 311-35.

majority whip Tom DeLay provides an example of this impulse in a story he recounted to a group of *Washington Post* reporters:

I was on "Meet the Press" ... right after the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Kosovo [he meant Belgrade], and the [Chinese] ambassador was on before me. And if you remember, he's kind of an obnoxious fellow and he's screaming and yelling about how bad the Americans were, and I had had it up to about here. So he's coming off the stage and I'm going onto the stage and I intentionally walked up to him and blocked his way ... I grabbed [his] hand and squeezed it as hard as I could and pulled him a kind of little jerk like this and I said: "Don't take the weakness of this president as the weakness of the American people". And he looked at me kind of funny, so I pulled him real close, nose to nose, and I repeated it very slowly, and said, "Do-not-take-the-weakness-of this president as the weakness of the American people".¹⁵

DeLay's bullying is shocking, but I suggest that his dismay at this Chinese challenge to his positive self-view as an American was widely shared. "How can they think that we Americans could do such a thing? We are not that kind of people!" was a widespread sentiment.¹⁶

For Chinese, however, there is no reason to extend charitable attributions to outgroup Americans. The bombing, furthermore, fit in with the emerging "victimization narrative" of Chinese suffering at the hands of the West during the "Century of Humiliation".¹⁷ For instance, a *People's Daily* article entitled "This is Not 1899 China" declared:

The wheel of history will not go backward. This is 1999, not 1899. This is not ... the age when people can barge about the world in gunboats ... It is not the age when the Western powers plundered the 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 won victory over the United States on the Korean battleground. The Chinese people are not to be bullied, and China's sovereignty and dignity are not to be violated ... US-led NATO had better remember this.¹⁸

¹⁵ "A Lesson in Diplomacy", *Washington Post*, 16 April 2000, p. B2.

¹⁶ Mild-mannered Jim Lehrer, for instance, was so stunned by the Chinese view that America intentionally bombed their embassy that he brought up the issue seven times in an interview with Chinese ambassador Li. "Interview with Ambassador Li Zhaoxing", *PBS NewsHour*, 10 May 1999.

¹⁷ I write "emerging" because the "victor narrative" dominant under Mao persists; that is, the view that the masses heroically defeated feudal and imperialist forces.

¹⁸ Han Zhongkun, "Zhongguo, bushi yibajiujiu" (This is Not 1899 China), *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), 12 May 1999. See <<http://www.peopledaily.com.cn/item/kangyi/199905/12/051213.html>>. In English, see Foreign Broadcast Information Services—China 1999-0512.

The Belgrade bombing, in this Chinese view, was not an isolated event; it was, rather, the latest of a long series of Western aggressions against China. Developmental psychologists have demonstrated that those who have experienced severe trauma are more likely to attribute hostile intent to ambiguous acts.¹⁹ The Century of Humiliation was a severe trauma because it fundamentally decentered the Chinese view of the world and their place within it. This trauma continues to shape Chinese understandings of themselves and the world they live in. Chinese views of the Belgrade bombing are no exception: attributions of American intentionality must be understood in the context of the emerging "victimization narrative" of China's past encounters with Western imperialism.

The letters speculate about America's precise goals: to foment domestic social chaos; to damage the Chinese economy; to divide China; to test the Chinese government's resolve; and, more fundamentally, to humiliate China. Because America "fears a strengthened China", a "young teacher" from Kunming (letter 3.44) writes, NATO seeks to "foment chaos". This would allow America, according to an e-mail from Beijing (letter 4.10), to "topple China without fighting". Tian Chengyou from Zhengzhou similarly argues that the timing of the bombing (with China's economy on the rise, the 10th anniversary of Tiananmen and the approaching American elections) points to America's goal: inciting domestic chaos (letter 7.15). In an essay entitled "America's Plot" (letter 5.4), Qiu Yingxiong concurs: "because of defeats in Korea and Vietnam, America is not sure that it can subdue (*chenfu*) China". It therefore seeks to test the Chinese government's resolve.

In his lengthy essay, "A Shattered Dream" (letter 8.11) cited above, Ouyang from Wuhan locates a more fundamental motive underlying the American bombing: humiliating China.

Fellow Chinese, this is actually Americans humiliating us! The American desire to humiliate us is no mere recent event. Blocking our hosting of the Olympics was a humiliation. Boarding the *Milky Way*²⁰ by force to search its cargo was a humiliation. Recent allegations that we stole their [nuclear] secrets are a humiliation. The motive for the bombing of our embassy was also to humiliate China.

Once this goal is understood, Ouyang explains, American behaviour starts to make sense. America's "compulsive lying" about the bombing, for example, is part of a larger plan: "Their goal is to humiliate Chinese, and the more absurd [their explanations], the more they can humiliate [us]".

¹⁹ See, for example, Kenneth A. Dodge and David Schwartz, "Social Information Processing Mechanisms in Aggressive Behavior", *Handbook of Antisocial Behavior* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1997), pp. 171-80.

²⁰ The *Milky Way* was a Chinese cargo ship headed for the Middle East that the US Navy intercepted in 1992.

“Protect the motherland and our national self-respect!”²¹

My heartfelt respects to Xu Xinghu and Zhu Ying!
 Your blood will not have been shed in vain!!!!!!!!!!!!
 The Chinese people cannot be bullied,
 and the Chinese people cannot be insulted!!!!

“Two female students from Wuhan University” (letter 2.47)

Why do the letter writers view the Belgrade bombing as a threat to China’s national self-respect? And how should we understand the various angry responses to this threat (demands for apologies and explanations, tongue lashings, demonstrations, calls for economic boycotts, revenge, and so on)?

Social identity theory (SIT), the dominant approach to intergroup relations in social psychology today, can help us to answer these questions. SIT posits two aspects of the self: personal identity and social identity. When a social identity is salient, that group identity becomes part of the self: it becomes represented in the individual’s self-concept.²² Research on self-esteem in the SIT tradition can help us better understand the Chinese reaction to the Belgrade bombing. To the extent that we associate with a certain group, we gain “collective self-esteem” from that group’s accomplishments.²³ A team of social psychologists, for instance, discovered that students tend to wear their school colours more often following a football victory than after a loss, a finding they explain as a desire to “bask in reflected glory”.²⁴ The same is true of our national identity: to the extent that we identify with our nation, our self-esteem is tied to its fate. In another experiment, women who were shown a clip from an altered *Rocky IV*, in which the American boxer (played by Sylvester Stallone) lost to the Russian (rather than defeated him), were found to have lost national self-esteem. Self-esteem was restored, however, if they were subsequently allowed to denigrate Russians.²⁵

The anger that Chinese displayed toward America during the bombing protests, similarly, sought to restore national self-esteem or *mianzi* (face). The letters of condolence tend to focus on the question of how Chinese can maintain *mianzi*. A few put their faith in divine retribution. Some rely on the government

²¹ Letter 1.54 from “a Wuhan citizen (*shimin*)”.

²² John C. Turner, *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

²³ See, for example, Jennifer Crocker and Riia Luhtanen, “Collective Self-Esteem and Ingroup Bias”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (January 1990), pp. 60–7.

²⁴ Robert B. Cialdini et al., “Basking in Reflected Glory: Three (Football) Field Studies”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (September 1976), pp. 366–75.

²⁵ See Nyla R. Branscombe and Daniel L. Wann, “Collective Self-Esteem Consequences of Outgroup Derogation When a Valued Social Identity is on Trial”, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 6 (November–December 1994), pp. 641–57.

to restore justice, arguing that it should demand punishment of the "war criminals", as well as an explanation, apology and compensation. Others seek personal relief for their rage through the derogation of then US President Bill Clinton and NATO. Most, however, focus on group solutions: what we, as Chinese, should do to restore our self-respect.

All of these prescriptions seek to right a wrong. Almost all of the letters express an "outrage" or "indignation" (*fennu, fenkai, qifen*) tied to the notion of injustice; none speak of more visceral forms of anger, like being "peeved" or "ticked off" (*shengqi*). Such "higher" anger is "designed to rectify injustice", one group of psychologists writes, "to reassert power or status, to frighten the offending person into compliance, to restore a desired state of affairs".²⁶

A few letter writers put their faith in divine justice. Tang Haijun, a "Jiangsu Net-friend" (*wangyou*), soberly predicts that "the aggressors will pay a heavy price for their heinous crimes" (letter 2.23). An e-mail from Beijing is less dispassionate: "There will be a reckoning. I believe it, believe it, believe it!! Blood will not flow in vain!!" (letter 4.12).

Others stipulate exactly who ought to "restore justice" (*taohui gongdao*): the Chinese government. Many letters express a strong desire that the government take a tough stand. In a letter (2.29) signed by 35 "hot-blooded youth from Hunan", the line "We support the Chinese government's just stand!!!" reads more like a demand than a complacent acceptance of Party authority. Many of the letters detail specific requests and demands, which often extend well beyond securing a mere apology from NATO. According to some writers, the government should obtain a satisfactory explanation and demand monetary compensation. Yan Cui from Guangzhou sent in a letter he had written to the US president, which asks, "Even more infuriating [than the bombing itself] is that after the tragedy, you have been arrogant and impolite, not only failing to offer an apology, but actually resorting to sophistry (*qiangci duoli*). How can the Chinese people accept such an explanation?" (letter 9.2). Apologies sound hollow without a convincing accounting of the bombing. Monetary compensation offers some satisfaction for a writer from Shanghai, who urges the *Guangming Daily* editors to "sue America, Clinton and NATO in Chinese courts, according to Penal Law Codes 6, 8, 15 and 120, and to seek indemnity under Code 36 ... Protect the Chinese people's proper rights!" (letter 3.16). Indemnities seem important not as monetary compensation, but as a public punishment that symbolically restores China to its proper status.

To restore their personal self-esteem, some writers take out their anger on America and NATO. Bill Clinton embodies America and is a popular object of derision. For instance, Beijing's Chen Jie abuses Clinton as a "bad person" who "cannot even govern his own country", which is "plagued by guns and drugs". NATO faces similar derision. X. F. Liu, from the Stone Computer Group in

²⁶ Phillip Shaver, Judith Schwartz, Donald Kirson and Cary O'Connor, "Emotion Knowledge: Further Exploration of a Prototype Approach", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 52, No. 6 (1987), p. 1078.

Beijing, declares NATO a “mad dog” (letter 3.33), while Zhou Shaogeng, of the China Railroad Foreign Services Company, composed a lengthy song as a “battle cry to arouse the people” (letter 10.6). Each stanza begins with a new insult:

NATO is a group of thieves ...
 that use the blood and flesh of others as bricks and tiles
 to build their own safe and happy den.
 NATO is a group of madmen ...
 whose hearts have been blackened by the smoke of gunpowder ...
 NATO is a group of fools ...
 who close their eyes and refuse to look back.
 What is NATO?
 NATO is the nemesis of peace ...

Many letters stress the importance of self-strengthening to turn China into a powerful country not easily humiliated. An e-mail from Beijing (letter 4.25) puts this consensus view succinctly: “we will only avoid being insulted if we strengthen ourselves”. The phrase “turn grief into strength” (*hua beitung wei liliang*) is a continuous thread throughout the writings. Most of the students who wrote in pledge to study hard to empower China.²⁷ The radiology majors at Harbin Medical University, for example, pledge: “We promise the Party and all our countrymen that we will turn grief into strength, studying hard to strengthen our country into a world superpower” (letter 3.20). The incoming biochemistry class of 1998 at Nankai University similarly writes from Tianjin: “We will study hard to strengthen the motherland ... so that in the not so distant future no hostile force will dare or be able to take military action against China” (letter 2.43). The dream of a “prosperous country and a strong army” (*fuguo qiangbing*) still inspires Chinese over a century after it was first promoted by late-Qing-dynasty reformers.

Can China strengthen itself enough to prevent future humiliations? Many of the writers reassure themselves by locating power in unity and numbers. For Wu Jing (letter 9.6), whose “heart still feels like a large stone is pressed down upon it”, a united China is the answer: “Ever since my feelings of grief and outrage passed, I have been wondering what, as a Chinese, I should do. How can we prevent our martyrs’ blood from having flowed in vain?” Wu proposes establishing a commemorative fund: “one yuan from every Chinese would not be much money, but it would show the American imperialists Chinese unity. The Chinese people, of one mind and one will, will not be insulted”. Others find strength in numbers. For instance, an undergraduate from Central China Industrial University (letter 8.10) deploys China’s billions in a poem written out of “great pain and fury”:

²⁷ During the Belgrade bombing protests, the Communist elite exhorted students to return to their classrooms to study and strengthen the country. Ironically, this is exactly the argument Nationalists used against the Communists in the 1930s and 1940s.

1.2 billion people shout together:

The Chinese race will not be insulted!

The giant dragon has woken to take off in the Orient,

How can your kind of paper tiger resist?

Some writers urge retaliation through an economic boycott. A poem (letter 10.2) from Shenyang in China's northeast waxes eloquent on economic nationalism:

When we are wearing Pierre Cardin and Nike ...

When we are driving Cadillacs, Lincolns, and going to KFC and McDonald's ...

Do we have a clear conscience?

No!!!

As our fishing boats are stopped and searched unreasonably.

As our compatriots lose their lives in the sea protecting the Diaoyu Islands [from Japan] ...

Can we still sit in front of our Sony televisions?

No!!!

Koreans are proud to use their own national products ...

Can we still find glory by using foreign products?

No!!!

Let's resolve to produce and use national products!

This is a popular cry. An employee at the Shenzhen Labour Bureau e-mailed the *Guangming Daily* a copy of a letter (3.27) he had sent to the Jinshan Corporation, a Beijing competitor of Microsoft:

American products bring us pleasure—and bombs and disaster. And the West uses the profits from its sales in China to build weapons and target the Chinese people ... How can Chinese be happy about this? I have long been a nationalist and have never used Japanese goods ... Now I will not buy American goods either. I urge your company to seize this precious turning point of broad nationalist mobilization to promote national products, earning face for the nation and bringing credit to China.

Several information technology companies wrote in pledging sales boycotts. Fujian United Information Services, for instance, promised the *Guangming Daily* that it would cease selling IBM, Lotus and other American products (letter 1.21).²⁸

Other writers turn their attention outward, appealing to “international society” (*guoji shehui*) to take China's side in a global popular opinion battle. An e-mail from Shandong (7.11) is concise: “We must fully utilize the power of

²⁸ An October 2000 trip to their Web site (<<http://www.fzfed.com.cn/fzfed/index.html>>), however, reveals both that Fujian United remains a “Microsoft certified” solution provider, and that they still sell IBM computers.

popular opinion to attack the American aggressors". Zhang Qian from Beijing suggests setting up a counter on the *Guangming Daily* Web site that would number the days that pass without an American apology. The passing of every additional day, he argues, will bring shame upon NATO (letter 9.9).²⁹ Zhang has a powerful vision of cyber-nationalism: "The Internet is Western, but ... we Chinese can use it to tell the people of the world that China cannot be insulted!"

A number of letters speak emotionally of revenge. The last lines of a poem (7.13) sent in by Wang Shuke of Shanxi Province read:

The countless masses work together,
and plan revenge in ten years.
This is the hatred of our race-nation.

Other letters and poems maintain this threatening tone, often deploying the menacing proverb, "to undergo hardships and strengthen one's resolve to wipe away the national humiliation" (*wo xin chang dan*) (e.g., letters 2.28, 7.2 and 10.3). Blood is an even more pervasive theme. Many write cryptically that the martyrs' blood will not have been shed in vain, while others demand a cashing in on the "blood debt" (*xuezhai*). R. X. Liu, for instance, writes from Inner Mongolia (letter 1.50):

The blood debt must be repaid with blood! ... 1.2 billion Chinese will persist in fighting American imperialism to the end. We will not be as meek as lambs at the slaughterhouse (*renren xingge*).

For some writers, the restoration of Chinese dignity justifies militarization. An e-mail (8.6) from Shenyang proposes that everyone contribute money toward buying an aircraft carrier: "When we have a strong and modern military, we'll see who still dares to bully us!" A writer from Guangzhou also raises the spectre of violence (letter 4.27):

Chinese love peace and seek economic development. But ... we do not fear war. China's youth should unite ... shoulder to shoulder, and shout at the imperialists: "The Chinese people cannot be insulted!"³⁰

Several letters, notably, invoke pride in past military "victories" over America in Korea and Vietnam. This pride creates the confidence necessary for a possible future military encounter with the United States (e.g., letters 3.7, 5.4, 8.2 and 8.9).³¹

²⁹ The editors of the *Guangming Daily* similarly seek to shame America by posting at the top of their condolences Web site two English translations of letters to Bill Clinton written by the parents of the deceased. Zhu Fulai and Guo Guiqi write: "We had a happy family ... a perfect family. How happy we were! ... we wish you, your wife, and your daughter a happy life!" See <http://www.gmw.com.cn/2_zhuanti/jinian/jnzj/xzw/48.html>.

³⁰ In the original Chinese, "but" (*danshi*) strongly emphasizes what follows it: not "peace" but the menacing "we do not fear war".

³¹ The Korean War was also invoked during the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, when confidence in an encounter with the US military was similarly needed. For instance, a large photograph of

Despite the ferocity of much of this nationalist rhetoric, it must be understood in the context of the transient threat that the Belgrade bombing represented to Chinese national self-esteem. As sociologist J. M. Barbalet has noted: "Vengefulness is an emotion of power relations. It functions to correct imbalanced or disjointed power relationships. Vengefulness is concerned with restoring social actors to their rightful place in relationships".³²

Whether throwing bricks at the US embassy or hurling invective at the US president, for many Chinese various forms of "outgroup denigration" served to restore a healthy sense of self-respect.

"Wolves are, after all, wolves!"³³

There is, however, a more subtle danger: an antagonistic view of Sino-American relations, previously confined to a small group of disaffected intellectuals, may have gained a wider currency among ordinary Chinese. If unallayed, this could eventually lay the psychological foundations for violent conflict.

Many of the condolence letters suggest a view of Sino-American relations that is highly Manichean; the opposition of good against evil is a thread throughout the letters. A member of the Laiwu City Party Committee in Shandong province, for example, describes the situation as a "battle between justice and evil. And justice will prevail!" (letter 3.22). A letter (9.1) from Guangdong even romanticizes the deceased *Guangming Daily* reporters as "chivalrous" and "possessing a strong sense of justice", just like the heroes in Jin Yong's martial arts novels: "weaponless, they used their pens to help a weak race" (the Serbs). In such writings China is just and America is evil; there is no gray zone.

In some of the letters, unfortunately, "they" become a threat to "our" very existence. A lengthy e-mail (letter 10.5) from Peng Xuewu in Guangxi reads:

Americans say, "I have a dream. I wish to be the king of the world!" Everyone knows that the first line is from Martin Luther King's famous speech; Leonardo DiCaprio, the lead actor in *Titanic*, yells the second. Combined, they represent the feelings of Americans today ... This can be seen in recent Hollywood flicks like *Independence Day* and *The Last Days*, in which Americans save the world.

Peng resents such "arrogance" and perceives American "hegemonism" as a threat to his very identity. After the Belgrade bombing, many Chinese came to view

a Korean War veteran sternly waving his finger adorned the cover of a 1996 *Shenzhen Panorama Weekly*. It was accompanied by a large caption, warning: "We have squared off before".

³² J. M. Barbalet, *Emotion, Social Theory, and Social Structure: A Macrosociological Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 136.

³³ The last line of the poem, "A True Story of Bestiality", written by a secretary in the Dean's Office at the Southwestern Economics and Finance University in Chengdu, Sichuan province (letter 9.7).

Sino-American relations as a zero-sum game. As an observer in Hong Kong has recently lamented about much of the current wave of Chinese nationalist writings, "a 'zero-sum' mentality holds that America's gains (or losses) are China's losses (or gains)".³⁴

Psychologist Herbert Kelman, who has written extensively about identity competition in Israeli-Palestinian relations, argues that when national identities become locked into a state of "negative interdependence", "each perceives the very existence of the other ... to be a threat to its own existence and status as a nation". Israelis and Palestinians, in Kelman's view, do not just compete over material goods such as territory and resources; they also wage a zero-sum battle over identity. Such "existential conflict" involves a systematic effort to delegitimize the other by defining "them" in morally unacceptable ways. Palestinians, for instance, depict Zionism as "racism", while Israelis label the PLO as "terrorist". In this state of negative interdependence, Kelman argues, "Any legitimacy extended to the enemy is seen to detract from the group's own legitimacy".³⁵ This leads to further polarization. The dehumanization of the "other" serves to exclude "them" from the moral community of humanity.

Several of the Chinese letter writers engage in such existential combat, dehumanizing America. After condemning the arrogance of American movies such as *Independence Day*, Peng Xuewu (Letter 10.5) writes, "American scum (*Meiguo lao*) are truly like 'Piggy looking into the mirror'—and they think extremely highly of themselves!" Piggy, a mystical warrior pig, provides comic relief during the Monkey King's adventures in *The Journey to the West*. "Piggy looking into the mirror" (*Zhubajie zhao jingzi*) is a famous Chinese *xiehouyu*, or riddle-pun. The riddle posits something "not human in or out of the mirror" (*li wai bushi ren*). The pun is a play on the last character, *ren*: "humane/benevolent" is substituted for "human". America, Peng derisively informs us, is both literally and figuratively inhuman; it is just an ugly but vain pig.

We have already seen that the bombing is regularly referred to as "barbaric". Its American and NATO perpetrators, therefore, are barbarians and even beasts. A writer from Shandong (letter 10.7) evokes a well-known fable:

The Eight Nation Army invaded a hundred years ago, and the American invasions of Korea and Vietnam were several decades ago. The smoke has cleared, and the fires caused by foreign bombs and rockets have all burned to ashes. The Cold War is long past. The wolf won't eat men any more, right? And the fox will be tamed, right? How can the world have so many things that are black and white? Aren't they all gray? Why did a Chinese write "Mr. Dongguo and the Wolf"?

³⁴ Wang Yuesheng, "Shehui qingxu, wenming jiaowang yu gongtong jiazhi" ("Social Sentiment, the Exchange of Civilizations, and Common Values"), in Xiao Pang (ed.), *Zhongguo ruhe miandui Xifang* (How China Faces the West) (Hong Kong: Mirror Books, 1997), p. 131.

³⁵ Herbert C. Kelman, "The Interdependence of Israeli and Palestinian National Identities: The Role of the Other in Existential Conflicts", *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Fall 1999), pp. 588, 591.

Chinese children memorize the story "Mr Dongguo and the Wolf" (*Dongguo xiansheng he lang*) in elementary school. It tells an Aesopian fable of a kind man who helps a wolf escape a hunter. When the danger has passed, however, the wolf turns on him. The moral of the story is that we should clearly distinguish good from bad. Our Shandong writer's point is that America—the wolf—has a fundamentally evil nature. Chinese, therefore, should not fool themselves into believing that America will change.

Such dehumanization lays the psychological foundation for violence. While these extreme views and actions must be understood in the context of restoring a temporarily threatened Chinese self-esteem, they reveal a danger inherent in a Sino-American relationship devoid of mutual trust. In *War Without Mercy*, John Dower tells a chilling tale about the role that dehumanization played in the brutality of the war between the United States and Japan. Racial rhetoric and demonization of the "other" set the Pacific War apart from the war in Europe, and few prisoners were taken.³⁶ The *Guangming Daily* condolence letters sometimes tell an alarmingly similar tale.

Implications for Sino-American Relations

How should we understand angry Chinese reactions to the Belgrade bombing? Do the rock throwing, calls for vengeance and insistence that the bombing was intentional indicate the emergence of an irrational "yellow horde"? Is China out to upset the global balance of power?

Drawing on narratives of China's early modern past as well as experimental findings in psychology, I argue that Western alarmists are wrong to point to the protests as evidence of a China threat. The Belgrade bombing fits perfectly into the emerging victimization narrative about China's "Century of Humiliation". And attribution theory suggests that people often do not give outgroup members the benefit of the doubt. That Chinese rejected American claims that the bombing was an accident, from this perspective, is completely natural.

We should also understand Chinese outbursts of anger. The social psychological literature on collective self-esteem has convincingly demonstrated that when a valued social identity is perceived to be under threat, outgroup derogation is a natural response. In *Injustice*, Barrington Moore argues: "Vengeance means retaliation. It also means a reassertion of human dignity or worth, after injury or damage. Both are basic sentiments behind moral anger and the sense of injustice".³⁷

The condolence letters do not, in sum, provide evidence to support claims that China currently has revisionist intentions vis-à-vis the world system. They do, however, suggest the dangers of a Manichean, zero-sum view of Sino-American relations. America, in this emerging Chinese view, is not just arrogant

³⁶ John Dower, *War Without Mercy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

³⁷ Barrington Moore, *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 17.

but actively seeks to prevent China from prospering and gaining status in the world system. If such a view spreads, an anti-Western revisionism will become a legitimate foreign policy option for many Chinese.

While this article focuses on Chinese perceptions of America, I want to note that many Americans are also beginning to view US-China relations in zero-sum terms. Richard Madsen argues persuasively in his *China and the American Dream* that Americans have long deployed the foil of Chinese tyranny to construct their "liberal myth".³⁸ This did not end with the Cold War. Today, American ideologues continue to depict China as the last bastion of despotism, as a way to flatter themselves as freedom fighters. In the 1997 sensation, *The Coming Conflict with China*, Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro, two journalists formerly stationed in Beijing, argue that China is militarizing with expansionist aims.³⁹ Conservative China bashers have more recently emerged on Capitol Hill to attack "Panda Huggers" and "Sinapologists" in academia and the government. They advocate a tough China policy. For instance, William Triplett, co-author of *Year of the Rat and Red Dragon Rising*, and former staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, argues that China is a rising power determined to challenge the United States and that China has a dictatorial regime that suppresses "the Chinese people's yearning for freedom and democracy".⁴⁰ Such rhetoric fosters a Manichean vision of US-China relations: liberal America must stand up for democracy, disciplining evil and despotic China.⁴¹

Realists in the field of international relations are right that there are conflicts of material interests in contemporary Sino-American relations. The real danger, however, may lie in the realm of what Kelman calls "existential conflict": the possible emergence of a zero-sum attitude toward identity competition on both sides of the Pacific. In the material realm, Chinese and Americans arguably exist in a state of positive interdependence: both benefit from their mutual trade and rely on a peaceful relationship to guarantee their physical security. In the realm of identity, however, Chinese and Americans increasingly perceive their relationship as one of negative interdependence.

The emergence of existential conflict in Sino-American relations was particularly evident following the April mid-air collision over the South China Sea. As in 1999 both Chinese and Americans viewed the incident as a threat to their self-esteem. Many Chinese perceived America's attitude toward the death of

³⁸ Richard Madsen, *China and the American Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

³⁹ Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1997).

⁴⁰ Robert G. Kaiser and Steven Mufson, "'Blue Team' Draws a Hard Line on Beijing; Action on Hill Reflects Informal Group's Clout", *Washington Post*, 22 February 2000, p. A1.

⁴¹ For a biting critique of the Western media's attempts to "discipline" China, see Rey Chow, "King Kong in Hong Kong: Watching the 'Handover' from the USA", *Social Text*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 93-108.

the Chinese pilot as callous and a humiliating loss of face. Many Americans had a mirror view: writing in *The Weekly Standard*, Robert Kagan and William Kristol declared the Bush administration's handling of the affair "a national humiliation": Bush's "groveling" was a degrading loss of face.⁴² And, as in 1999, hawks on both sides displayed an anger toward each other that sought to bolster national self-esteem. For instance, by publicly calling Bush a "coward" (in a letter from the wife of the dead pilot), Beijing sought to gain face for China at Washington's expense. American hawks also sought vengeance: Kagan and Kristol, for example, demanded that "China must now pay a price". Until Chinese and Americans learn to affirm rather than threaten each other's self-concepts, their common interest in a stable Asia Pacific will not be sufficient to ensure peace in the 21st century.

Columbus, Ohio
April 2001

⁴² Robert Kagan and William Kristol, "A National Humiliation", *The Weekly Standard*, 16-23 April 2001, p. 14.