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National History Museums as National Monuments

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The Nationalist Museum

People identify themselves, their culture, and their country's place in the world with a version of history presented to them by family, schools, and public institutions such as history museums. The content, location and architectural design of history museums often intentionally articulate a specific message to observers; museums present not only the facts of a historical period or event, but either intentionally or unintentionally express the way that museum designers seek to portray their society and its relationship to others. As such, publicly funded history museums designed by government approved curators and architects present a widely accessible lens through which one can analyze a society's values. Many states, including China and the United States, often use history museums to reinforce artificial, imposed and idealized concepts of the nation; they can be instruments to create and cement a unifying social structure or historical narrative upon diverse groups of people. Governments do this in order to create a sense of interdependence between citizens and government, and between varying social groups. One of the most effective methods to achieve this is to identify a savage foreign enemy from which only a unified nation can defend itself. History museums and especially those

which focus on war or a particular atrocity reveal the often authoritatively amplified degree of nationalism in a society. This essay will argue that history museums often abdicate their duty to remain academic by presenting themselves more like national monuments than national libraries; they rely significantly more on emotional rather than intellectual engagement with visitors, and engage in politically motivated advocacy not to reveal the past but to influence the future.

Instrumentalizing the presentation of history for political ends represents a significant departure from the ideals that many museologists believe history museums should embody. Emmanuel N. Arinze, once president of the Commonwealth Association of Museums, eloquently stated in a lecture that “The traditional role of museums is to collect objects and materials of cultural, religious and historical importance, preserve them, research into them and present them to the public for the purpose of education and enjoyment.”¹ In nationalist societies, particularly those with authoritarian governments, history museums disproportionately exploit visitors’ emotional responses to location, grand architectural designs and graphic imagery to promote the historical narrative of their government-approved designers. History museums are meant to teach history by relying on their unparalleled access to historical materials, but unfortunately, history museums often become another instrument of government rather than fulfilling their role as academic institutions. Furthermore, a history museum’s location, design, and level of funding or lack thereof often correspond to a hierarchy of historical events which the government

¹ Emmanuel M. Arinze, “The Role of the Museum in Society,” (lecture at the National Museum, Georgetown, Guyana, May 17, 1999).

emphasizes or omits to form a self-glorifying historical narrative. This manipulative presentation of history to suit nationalist ends perverts a social science whose mantra has always been critical and objective analysis. Museums should not be instruments of governments that use nationalism to stay in power, they should rather be places of education, critical analysis and dialogue.

French social theorist Emile Durkheim identified and emphasized the increasing importance of social solidarity based on interdependence in his book titled *The Division of Labor*; he calls solidarity based on interdependence rather than blood ties: “organic solidarity.”² The concept of the nation, as articulated in many history museums today, is used to amplify these sentiments of interdependence in the hopes of strengthening organic solidarity among citizens. Ernest Gellner, a mid-20th century historian who traced the origins of national sentiment in Europe from medieval times to the present, believed that the cultural, economic, and historical factors required to unify members of a society under the idea of a common nation were too numerous to be sustained in the long term.³ But Durkheim, on the other hand, believed the socio-economic phenomena which produced organic solidarity, such as the division of labor, are only increasing with the passage of time.⁴ If Gellner were correct, forms of solidarity based on the nation should have weakened through time, but today’s history museums provide one of many illustrative examples that the opposite is happening. Forms of social solidarity based on interdependence are, as Durkheim predicted,

² Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, (New York: The Free Press, 1984), book I, chapters 2 and 3.

³ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), chapter 4.

⁴ Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, (New York: The Free Press, 1984), book II, chapters 4 and 5.

strengthening not only through the development of socio-economic phenomena such as the division of labor, but also as a result of government instrumentalization of public spaces such as museums.

Many history museums create organic solidarity through the identification of savage enemies which citizens must uniformly oppose, and aspirational goals which citizens must uniformly pursue. The spirit of resistance to external oppression is an effective glue that most societies like to think of as a characteristic of their shared culture. History museums usually tell the story of a significant moment in a nation's history; a historical event which characterized the state's past and contributed to its present. These often-painful historical events give citizens the ability to unify through a common past, but also through aspirations of a prosperous common future; a future in which the nation has overcome the challenges it faced historically.

In certain museums, particularly those which function both as memorials to victims of a historical event and educational history museums (memorial-museums)⁵ the nation is portrayed as either dormant or as having been struck down from its previously high status. Language related to the concept of rejuvenation pervades these museums, and the morbid nature of memorial-museums—especially those which focus on a specific atrocity or crime against humanity— helps reinforce the image of a nation that needed or still needs rejuvenation. The task of rejuvenating the nation, as communicated in nationalist memorial-museums, is not only the task of the government but, more importantly, of all people. Within the museum, people can be

⁵ Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018) chapter 1.

bombarded by political messages so that they exit the museum mindful of how their individual lives and daily actions contribute to or impede the prosperous future of their nation.

It is critically important to keep in mind that, more often than not, shocking images of violence displayed in memorial-museums are real photographs or representations of events that really took place; many countries need not invent histories of violent oppression. Contemporary sociologist Beth Baron proposes in her seminal work titled *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, that such viscerally painful memories unify and mobilize citizens; the nationalists' argument becomes that people must collaborate and unify to build the nation and regain its "honor".⁶ In her case study of Egypt, experiences of French occupation followed by Ottoman rule and finally British colonialism led nationalists to construe the Egyptian nation as possessing an essential "purity" best articulated through the image of an Egyptian mother.⁷ Baron's analysis asserts that feminized presentations of the nation are effective illustrations to develop national sentiment, and I believe that history museums, by virtue of their public and academic nature, are well suited to the task of cementing inspiring messages into public consciousness. When memorial-museums present the idealized mother as a symbol of the nation and its history, observers should realize that it is an image whose connotations have been well considered by the object and museum's designers. It's an image which was chosen because of its

⁶ Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), chapter 2.

⁷ Ibid. chapter 1.

political conformity to the designer's historical narrative, not necessarily because of its accurate depiction of anything historically significant whatsoever.

In authoritarian societies, painful historical events are used as what 21st century historian and sociologist Walter Hatch calls "affirming memor[ies]." ⁸ Each of the historical moments, as presented in nationalist history museums, affirms the current power of the state by presenting the current government as the teleological end of the nation's history. In nationalist societies with authoritarian governments, the nation's history is articulated with tremendous consistency to mobilize citizens in support of the government; Hatch believes that this relationship with and use of history is quite different from that manifested in many democratic societies.⁹ According to Hatch, some democratic societies are debilitated by their level of debate on critical parts of their history; the noise creates apathy.¹⁰ Authoritarian governments capitalize on their ability to communicate a message with near-perfect consistency in order to unify and mobilize their population, but democratic countries often struggle to turn diverse interpretations of history into a force of unification let alone mobilization. Compared to democratic governments, authoritarian governments are substantially more reliant on the creation and engraining of a mythology surrounding their present claim to power. The mythology might be based on select real historical events, but these are often emphasized at the expense of silence on others which, though undeniably significant, undermine the government's self-glorifying narrative.

⁸ Walter Hatch, "Bloody Memories: Affect and Effect of World War II Museums in China and Japan," *Peace and Change: A Journal of Peace Research*, (June 2014): page 367.

⁹ *Ibid.*,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*,

Consequently, certain historical events are memorialized in spaces such as memorial-museums, and others pushed under the rug of history.

Authoritarian governments communicate political messages to citizens in a variety of ways, but the sheer degree of government power reflected in the context of national history museums is unique. Memorial-museums are often built in culturally significant places which only the government has a right to develop and their architectural designs often exude strength.¹¹ Governments are the only entities capable of utilizing the memorial-museum space in the ways they do: combining educational displays with large and often awe-inspiring monuments to accentuate and emphasize the messages of their displays. What's more, in the context of war museums, governments can easily morph celebrations of soldiers, victims, survivors, and their descendants into a celebration of themselves.¹²

Memorial-museums have become an increasingly standard way for countries to present painful pieces of their history.¹³ Amy Sodaro, a contemporary sociologist, uses the first chapter of her book: *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*, to discuss the significant rise in memorial-museums across the globe. Sodaro links the phenomenon of increasingly numerous memorial-museums to a reconciliatory “memory boom” which began in the United States and some of Europe after WWII.¹⁴ Despite the reconciliatory aspects of this “memory boom” she acknowledges that since museums are frequently used to articulate

¹¹ Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018) chapter 1.

¹² *Ibid.*,

¹³ *Ibid.*,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*,

nationalist concepts, the increasing number of memorial-museums could indicate a worrying trend of more governments amplifying national sentiment through public spaces such as museums.¹⁵

The central function of a museum should be education through the presentation of historical objects and records, whereas the central function of a memorial should be solemn remembrance. One is public in the same way a university's lecture could be open to the public, while the other has the potential to be deeply personal for the atrocity's survivors or the families of the atrocity's victims. These rather different purposes are combined in the memorial-museum, and they're sometimes in tension with one another.¹⁶ Memorial-museums' increasing popularity indicates that numerous people believe the goals of education and remembrance are not mutually exclusive but rather complimentary. Viscerally emotional components of a memorial should help cement the history lessons articulated by a museum. The reality, however, is that the combined motives of memorials and museums create an overwhelming experience for the audience who can only absorb so much. Feeling overwhelmed at a memorial-museum is not only a response to what might be unfathomably painful history but also a product of the memorial-museum creator's intention; when people are overwhelmed, they essentialize. Once overwhelmed, people latch onto the core narrative presented by the museum, the nationalist narrative used by the government to legitimize itself. When one walks into the space of an authoritarian society's memorial-museum, the place seems sacred in its

¹⁵ Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018) chapter 7..

¹⁶ *Ibid.*,

solemnity, and the solemnity helps validate the legitimacy of almost any display one might encounter.

The historical and ideological narrative presented in authoritarian societies' memorial-museums contribute to the narrative pushed by their governments outside; in the museum, however, the government has even more control over the way the audience interpret their message. Unlike most other public spaces, where the government can at most dazzle citizens with propaganda but can't guarantee the way they'll take in a message, the museum provides a confined space which can be organized into a series of consecutive messages to be received how the designers intended. Museum-memorial creators pursue the goal of compellingly communicating their historical narrative more diligently than they do the objective and nuanced presentation of history; we should all keep that in mind when visiting memorial-museums.

Human Nature in Nationalist Museums; Repressed or Revealed?

Nationalist history museums and memorial-museums selectively amplify elements of human nature to elicit compassionate and violent sentiments among visitors directed towards those the museum paints as victims and oppressors respectively. Furthermore, many museums' own presentations of human nature vilify it by portraying evidence of horrific actions as humanity unrestrained; this helps garner support for a strong present-day government which prevents anything of the sort from ever happening again. The core, essentialized message of many memorial-museums instrumentalizes human nature for political and often nationalist ends.

The efforts of nationalist societies to mobilize people against foreign or domestic threats by dehumanizing members of enemy groups can be painted as either an oppression of people's natural inclination towards compassion and respect for other human beings or a promotion of people's natural but widely suppressed inclination towards violence. We've all felt the urge to help someone that's suffering, and many social theorists believe feelings like those strike to the very core of what it means to be human. Mencius, a Confucian philosopher from the 4th century B.C.E. insightfully illustrates the significance of this sentiment in a lecture attributed to him from the *Analects*; he tells the story of a person reacting with alarm and urgency to the sight of a child about to fall down a well.¹⁷ The observer's alarm, according to Mencius, would not be a result of them wanting to cultivate amity with the child's parents or for social prestige, they would feel alarmed and spring to action because all human beings are endowed with a natural sense of "humaneness"¹⁸ which elicits visceral responses to the suffering of others.¹⁹ Mencius even goes as far as to say that: "if one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human."²⁰

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an 18th century French philosopher, asserted in *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality Among Men*, that people are naturally "repulsed" by the suffering of other sentient beings.²¹ Just like Mencius,

¹⁷ Bryan W. Van Norden, *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2008), 2A6.

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¹⁹ Bryan W. Van Norden, *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2008), 2A6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*,

²¹ Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality among Men," in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, edited by Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), preface, page 127.

Rousseau believes that compassion and pity are so deeply rooted in the human psyche that they form part of our nature; according to Rousseau, these feelings were both felt and affected people's behavior before they even learned to use reason.²² These sentiments which Mencius classes under the Confucian virtue of "humaneness"²³ and that Jean-Jacques Rousseau calls "pity" and "compassion"²⁴ are selectively amplified and subdued in nationalist museums: to garner pity and compassion for the nation, and to foster hatred for the enemy.

Mencius, Rousseau and many other philosophers understand humanity as possessing an intrinsically pure and virtuous nature which is corrupted by the outside world. Some social theorists, like the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes and the 19th century German philosopher Friederich Nietzsche, however, see a bleaker human nature or a complete lack thereof. Their ideas stand diametrically opposed those of thinkers like Mencius and Rousseau; theirs is a critical alternate lens through which to view interactions between nationalist presentations in history museums and human nature. Hobbes's widely read *Leviathan* paints the portrait of a selfish and unscrupulous human nature while Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality* traces the creation of normative values through time thereby demonstrating the artificial nature of seemingly innate values such as right and wrong. From the Hobbesian-Nietzschean perspective, the manipulation of history at many memorial-museums in support of nationalism, militarism, and sometimes authoritarianism are

²² Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality among Men," in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, edited by Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), preface, page 127.

²³ Bryan W. Van Norden, *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2008), 2A6.

²⁴ Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality among Men," page 127.

government-taught lessons on the need for strong protection from human nature and the actions of savage foreigners.

Hobbes understood reason as a means to achieving one's desires; unlike Rousseau and Mencius, he emphasized human beings' desire for power rather than their natural inclination towards compassion or pity.²⁵ When placed in historical context, Hobbes's belief that human beings' could not peacefully co-exist without an all-powerful sovereign seems more understandable; he had just witnessed the chaos of civil war. The English civil war lasted from 1642 to 1651, and after almost a decade of bloodshed, Hobbes welcomed the arrival of the authoritarian ruler Oliver Cromwell. Without a sovereign to create a commonwealth through contract and mobilize citizens towards a unifying goal, people's actions are driven by justifiable base desires in pursuit of what Hobbes calls "felicity".²⁶ Felicity is the consecutive accomplishment of one's desires in succession, and unlike individual citizens, the sovereign is capable of set a direction for society which serves the interests of a felicitous future for all.

In the context of nationalism manifested at museums, a Hobbesian sovereign must constantly articulate that it successfully guarantees the safety of its subjects from foreign invasion. In many authoritarian societies today, the government asserts that the only possible way for there to be a change of government or political system would be for the state to dissolve through foreign invasion. This is one of the principal reasons that governments identify and dehumanize a savage enemy; to

²⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Group, 1985. First published 1651), chapter 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*,

garner support for itself by demonstrating its successful protection of all citizens. Through a Hobbesian lens, the ruler has every reason to openly present the nation as a ward of the government, because in doing so, they're reminding the people that in the state of nature, i.e. without the protection of the government, their very lives would be in danger. Perhaps, to get that point across, the more violent the image, the more history shocks the audience, the better.

Hobbes's list of natural human characteristics strongly contrasts those presented by Mencius and Rousseau, but Nietzsche's investigation into the historical origins of morality comes to even more radical conclusions than Hobbes on the subject of human nature. According to Nietzsche, there is no such thing as a set of values which are objectively virtuous, because the origins of ethics are historical rather than God-given. Nietzsche believes that natural inequalities, inequalities with which we're born, give certain individuals the capacity to enforce their will onto others.²⁷ These naturally strong individuals are the first to establish moral positions because their actions become the very definition of morals.²⁸ The weak, who remain at the mercy of the strong for centuries, eventually grow resentful of those who possess the strength they lack, and overthrow their systems of ethics; they create a system of values where weaknesses, rather than strength, defines virtue.²⁹

Nietzsche believes this was the kind of ethical system most people in Europe found themselves forced to live under at the turn of 20th century, and he considers it

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, translated by Carol Diethe, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, first published in 1887, 2006 edition used), essay 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*,

²⁹ *Ibid.*,

fundamentally life-denying.³⁰ When the weak define what is virtuous, as Nietzsche claims they do today, the strong are forced to mask their natural impulses towards violence, and in an effort to vent the impulses they cannot externalize, they direct their impulse towards violence inwards, and engage in self-torturing guilt and bad conscience.³¹ Some individuals even grow masochistic in that they believe guilt and bad conscience are signs of virtue; all because their society has taught them to loathe certain fundamental aspects of themselves.

In the context of the memorial-museum, and only the memorial-museum, their impulse towards violence is condoned because it's framed as a critically needed response to violent aggression; their impulses can finally be externalized and directed at a group whose actions society has determined to merit a violent response. Nietzsche calls this form of selectively condoned violence "subtilized" in that despite its primal character, it is relegated to exceptional contexts and exceptional spaces deemed appropriate by society at large. Memorial-museums, as locales of subtilized violence, show an important way that a society's violent sentiments are managed and directed by government.

If natural impulses towards violence are deliberately subdued by modern society, violent images presented at nationalist museums could be considered liberating to individuals who find their society's structurally imposed constraints on morality oppressive. A subset of visitors who go to memorial-museums might even

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, translated by Carol Diethe, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, first published in 1887, 2006 edition used), essay 3.

³¹ *Ibid.* essay 2.

come because they're specifically attracted to topics which elicit socially condoned sentiments of violence. Nationalism is meshed with these sentiments of violence in memorial-museums since the violence is depicted as occurring between national groups or nations at war; nationalism meshed with violence the core emotional reaction governments seed and then coopt to solidify their own power.

Roots of Chinese Nationalism

The cultural significance of the Holocaust and the Nanjing Massacre in American and Chinese society cannot be overstated. In America, the Holocaust is seen as a direct result of violent, expansionist German nationalism, while in China, the Nanjing Massacre affirms the narrative of a nation humiliated and oppressed by foreign aggressors. The Holocaust is seen as a reminder of the dangers of nationalism, whereas the Nanjing Massacre is used a sponsor of nationalism. The American relationship with nationalism is abstract but comprehensible: in the simplest of terms, our Declaration of Independence and Constitution state that the defining characteristics of our nation and its members are egalitarian, democratic ideals rather than a unifying race, religion, language or history. The Holocaust Museum is an example of America's outright opposition to the concept of nationalism while concurrently creating national sentiment through the collective subscription to certain ideals.

China, on the other hand, has a more complex history of nationalism, experiencing a spasmodic relationship with the concept as a result of its revolutionary and strongly authoritarian government. Understanding China's history of nationalism is critical to understanding the importance of various tools, such as memorial-

museums, the government uses to push its historical narrative. The Chinese government in some ways owes its present existence to the failures of a nationalist republican government, and after at first dismissing the concept in favor of universalist political ideals, the government now widely uses nationalism to garner support for itself. Once the communist government began instituting capitalist economic practices in the 80s, the groundwork was laid for an ideological crisis in China that tested the lengths to which the Communist Party would go to assert its firm hold on power. Instead of democratizing, the Chinese government has become more socially authoritarian, and stokes nationalism to legitimize its authority over so many aspects of people's lives. The government celebrates China's economic success in nationalist terms, and creates a historical narrative based around certain parts of its history, like the Nanjing Massacre, where it can legitimately paint China as the victim of foreign aggression.

Nationalism in China only developed relatively recently, beginning after centuries of non-Han-Chinese rule during the Qing Dynasty. The development of Western and Japanese imperialism, coinciding with the decline of the Qing, catalyzed the development of Chinese nationalism at the beginning of the 20th century. Before Sun Yat-sen led China's republican revolution in 1911, social solidarity was not based on interdependence but feudal loyalty to China's Qing Dynasty, and as nationalist anti-Qing sentiments grew in the beginning of the 20th century, Chinese writers and poets rearticulated the Chinese concept of the nation. Lu Xun, a revered novelist in China today, used the image of spiritual sickness in *A Madman's Diary* to illustrate his view that only a society with a deeply incongruous sense of self would so passively allow

foreign aggressors to abuse its members.³² In a phenomenon comparable to the declining use of Latin in Europe, Lu Xun and others made the concept of Chinese nationalism more accessible by publishing literature and political theory in modern rather than classical Chinese script. This was tremendously significant in that, as Ernest Gellner would agree, knowledge became progressively more accessible thereby creating an informed public that could intellectually justify its challenges to the Qing Dynasty.

As colonialism further oppressed China during its republican period after 1911, the Chinese public grew dissatisfied with Sun Yat-sen's Guo Min Dang government. Many thought the republicans had risen to power by claiming they would protect the interests of the nation, but then let the nation's territory continue to be carved up by Japan and the West. Dissatisfaction with the Guo Min Dang government and fury over China's oppression by foreign powers continued to grow, and manifested itself in certain contexts such as the May 4th Movement. This was a protest in the seaside city of Qingdao led by Chinese students in 1919 advocating for the reassertion of China's national sovereignty after foreign powers had yet again decided to claim part of China's territory as a reward for their participation in World War I.

After seeing republican proponents of the Chinese nation fail so thoroughly to conserve even the territorial integrity of the state, Mao Zedong's universalist communist ideology represented, for many Chinese, an equally motivating but

³² Lu Xun, "A Madman's Diary," from *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun*, (Beijing: Foreign Language Press: 1960).

critically alternative unifying concept to that of the nation. After coming to power, most of Mao's rule centered on the worship of himself and his interpretation of Marxist and Leninist ideology. The concept of the nation and nationalism was, under Mao, sometimes firmly discouraged: the cultural revolution, for example, saw the destruction of any cultural artifact, symbol, building, or person perceived as part of what Mao called the "Four Olds:" old customs, culture, habits, and ideas. To achieve communism, according to Mao, people needed to dedicate themselves entirely to the concept of class and Marx's "scientific world view" rather than what he considered the myopic concept of the Chinese nation. For a decade, what the Chinese government today considers symbols of the Chinese nation were pillaged and destroyed en masse; erasing those ten painful years and other similar events from historical record and public memory has become one of the chief objectives of the Communist Party, and public spaces such as memorial-museums cast the spotlight where the government wants it cast.

When Mao died in 1976, a technocratic member of government who had been sent to forced labor camps on multiple occasions, Deng Xiaoping, assumed power and began a process of economic "opening and reform" driven by a desire for economic development. Deng Xiaoping believed that there was only one key to the sovereignty, stability and prosperity of his nation: economic development. He and his successors have continued the "opening and reform" program until the present day, and China's meteoric GDP growth in the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s stand tribute to the effectiveness of these capitalistic policies at reviving China's economy.

As a result of China's unprecedented economic development in the 80s, 90s, and 2000s, the Chinese government now confidently states that unlike the imperial Qing or the republican Guo Min Dang, it was able to rejuvenate China and finally put an end to what the CCP³³ calls China's century of humiliation. Thus, it deserves the support and loyalty of the people. China's opening and reform program left many communist ideals by the wayside, therefore the Chinese government needed to find an alternative concept to unify Chinese people and legitimize its own rule. Collectivist and universalist communist ideology was no longer useful because it was no longer implemented in the economic sector; the government needed a new linchpin to unite citizens and legitimize its rule, and the concept of the nation proved perfectly suitable to the task.

Economic reforms led to a massive influx of Western ideologies into China, including that of democracy. In 1989, university students in Beijing began a protest to democratize China prompted by the death of Hu Yaobang, a reformist member of government famed for his open critiques of the Maoist era. The protests spread to the point that millions of citizens were on the streets of Beijing and the culturally significant Tiananmen square, located at the entrance to the Forbidden City and surrounded on three sides by Chinese government buildings. The protest was universalist in nature and rebuked the idea of a Chinese nation ideologically separated from the Western, cosmopolitan world.

³³ CCP: Chinese Communist Party

The protests were eventually violently suppressed by the Chinese government, and the international indignation over images leaking out of China showing civilians facing tanks, being crushed under the wheels of armored personnel carriers, and Chinese soldiers shooting indiscriminately into crowds prompted Deng Xiaoping to step down from power. The Chinese government articulated its view of the protest early on through an editorial published by *The People's Daily*, one of the Communist Party's official media mouthpieces. The government claimed that the socio-economic progress of the Chinese nation brought about by the opening and reform program could potentially be lost entirely through the chaos created by protesters in Beijing.³⁴ The government fashioned itself as a defender of the nation and its "revitalization"³⁵ even as they prepared soldiers for an openly violent confrontation with their own people.

Neither the CCP's historical narrative of China as a humiliated nation, nor as a rejuvenated nation acknowledges the significant harm that the Chinese Communist Party has done to China since its rise to power in 1949. The narrative of an oppressed nation focuses on foreign aggression and colonialism, and the narrative of a rejuvenated nation focuses on the economic development spearheaded by the communist party. Colonialism and foreign aggression did indeed oppress, abuse and exploit China, and the Communist Party did indeed spearhead China's unparalleled economic development between the late 20th and early 21st centuries, but the government's choice to emphasize these parts of Chinese history as opposed to their

³⁴ JianHui Zeng, "It Is Necessary to Take a Clear-Cut Stand Against Disturbances," *People's Daily*, April 26, 1989.

³⁵ *Ibid.*,

own shortcomings reveals a deeply seeded fear in the Chinese government of popular revolution. The Chinese government actively suppresses and censors any mention of the programs and initiatives instituted by the Communist Party which led to the deaths of millions of civilians in order to preserve the mythology that the Communist Party and especially Chairman Mao were and are nearly infallible.

In certain Chinese history museums and war memorials, including the Nanjing Massacre Museum, death tolls attributed to foreign aggressors are prominently featured; they're inscribed in large characters on the walls of the museum and translated into multiple languages. The death toll that the government presents, 300 000, is highly disputed amongst historians from all over the world, some of whom claim a more accurate death toll of the Nanjing Massacre could be around 50 000. The Chinese government's emphasis on the Nanjing Massacre as a historical rallying point and example of a nation's need for a strong government comes at the cost of acknowledging that the government's own actions caused the deaths of, conservative estimates say, 20 million Chinese civilians. The Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, for example, began in 1958 and 1966 respectively, when the Communist Party's power was already cemented and when China faced no immediate threat of invasion by foreign nations. The Great Leap Forward resulted in widespread starvation because Chairman Mao demanded that all economic production be dedicated to industrialization; there's no memorial dedicated to the many who starved because of this economic venture. The CCP has taken recourse to nationalist narratives with foreign threats precisely as a distraction from their own errors, and

their smokescreen includes the amplification and promotion of historical events which fit their narrative and censoring those that do not.

The Cultural Revolution was in some ways more disastrous than the Great Leap Forward, because elements of China's cultural heritage became the target of young revolutionaries taken out of school by Mao for the purposes of his Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution. Some of China's most revered monuments, temples, books, and intellectuals were targeted during the Cultural Revolution, and if Mao had not died in 1976, he might have continued the Cultural Revolution for years to come. When Mao finally died, blame for what the government termed the "excesses" of the Cultural Revolution was placed on the shoulders of the Gang of Four; a group of government officials including Mao's wife, who were scapegoated in order to protect the myth of the flawless Chairman Mao.

This method of scapegoating to protect the image of the Chairman Mao and the whole Communist Party is worryingly common in China today, and history museums are an important part of the smoke screen put up by the government. There is no museum dedicated to the millions of Chinese civilians who starved to death during the Great Leap Forward, and there isn't a single memorial in China dedicated to the wealth of cultural heritage lost in the Cultural Revolution. There are, however, memorial-museums all over China which push the government's nationalist historical narrative as centered around certain historical events which crystalized the challenges China overcame or survived thanks to the Communist Party.

Case Study Analysis

To support my investigation into the nationalist messaging of history museums, I visited two memorial-museums: The Memorial Hall of Victims in the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders, in Nanjing, China, and The United States Holocaust Museum and Memorial in Washington D.C., USA. My visits to the Nanjing Massacre Museum in Nanjing and the National Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. were particularly illuminating for this investigation, and I had the privilege to not only visit both museums during the summer of 2019 but also conduct interviews of other visitors after having attended. I took notes on the sequence of displays in each museum, my own impressions of the museum, and looked for visitors of differing age groups to ask about their impressions and takeaways from their visits. After comparing these two museums' different methods of presenting and teaching history, it became apparent that despite the vastly different cultural and historical roots of China and the US, the two museums communicated their messages in many of the same ways.

The Nanjing Massacre and the Holocaust both occurred during the Second World War and serve as infamous examples of the human potential for barbarity. In the Holocaust, Nazi Germany engaged in a system of industrialized extermination to eliminate Jews, Poles, Roma, Slavs, Communists, homosexuals and others from continental Europe, and in the Nanjing Massacre of December 1937, the Japanese invasion of Nanjing, a populous Chinese city, resulted in the widespread massacre and sexual abuse of Chinese civilians. The crimes against humanity which characterized the Holocaust and the Nanjing Massacre have left deep scars on the

survivors, descendants, and societies of their respective victims and aggressors. The magnitude of these two atrocities might be different –10 million killed in the Holocaust and several hundred thousand killed in the Nanjing Massacre— but in a war that claimed the lives of 60 million people, these two events still stand out as particularly heinous. The Holocaust Museums and the Nanjing Massacre Museum take on the grave responsibility of teaching this history to millions of visitors each year.

Both the National Holocaust Museum in D.C. and the Nanjing Massacre Museum in Nanjing were built in locations which confirm and amplify the significance of their topics in the government's historical narrative of the nation. The Nanjing Massacre Museum is in the center of what was once China's imperial capital, Nanjing, near the Yangtze river, and the Holocaust museum is on the National Mall, a strip of land in the center of D.C. dedicated to the presentation of American history and values through museums and monuments. The Holocaust Museum in D.C. stands among other great museums such as the National Air and Space Museum, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the National Museum of the American Indian, and others. The Nanjing Massacre Museum stands alone as a great museum in the middle of a bustling city, but its location is critical to the educational and political objectives of the museum because it is built on one of the mass graves filled with victims of the massacre. The Holocaust Museum's placement on the National Mall is a statement that the history of the Holocaust and the lessons that the world learned from it are just as much a part of the American nation and value system as the histories of Native Americans or African Americans. The Nanjing Massacre

Museum's placement uses the location of the museum as a piece of evidence to support the museum's displays.

Both the National Holocaust Museum and the Nanjing Massacre Museum are built in such a way that their architectural design contributes to the messages they're trying to communicate to visitors. The architect of the Nanjing Massacre Museum, Qi Kang, is the son of a Nanjing Massacre survivor, and designed the museum as a fractured black pyramid surrounded by sculptures of pulled iron in a style much like the sculptures of the Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti.³⁶ The sculptures represent the innocent people victimized by the Japanese during the Nanjing Massacre, and each sculpture sits above a plaque engraved with a phrase from the diary of a Nanjing Massacre survivor. The Chinese derogatory term for the Japanese, 日本恶魔, Japanese devil, is frequently featured on these inscriptions. The sculptures and monuments on the museum grounds lay on beds of white pebbles which accentuate the black sculptures and large red engraving of 300 000, the number of people the Chinese government claims were killed in the massacre.

The white pebbles link the more painful parts of the museum to the hopeful and aspirational ones, they provide a peaceful backdrop for both the solemn and hopeful elements of the museum.³⁷ In deciding on the shape and color of the pebbles, Qi Kang was careful not to choose pebbles which resembled Japanese stone gardens too closely, he wanted to make sure the museum retained a purely Chinese aesthetic.³⁸

³⁶ Kang Qi, "Qi Kang, Designer of Nanjing Massacre Memorial Museum: Architecture Can Awaken," interview by Huang Song, *名家对话*, The Paper, August 15, 2017, http://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1718687.

³⁷ Ibid.,

³⁸ Ibid.,

The Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. does not stand out among its surroundings as much as the Nanjing Massacre Museum; the Holocaust Museum stands sandwiched between two other museums, three-stories high and marble-white with large windows which, unlike the Nanjing Massacre Museum, allow a lot of natural light to permeate the space. The design of these two museums tries to strike a balance between the solemn and hopeful; the pebble beds in Nanjing, the huge windows for natural light in D.C., these two sentiments set the tone for one's experience in the museum before even stepping through its doors.

History museums usually present their topics by constructing a chronological narrative of events, pausing to emphasize particularly painful, hopeful, or otherwise poignant parts of their topics. In the case of the memorial-museums like the Nanjing Massacre Museum and the Holocaust Museum in D.C., the museums start by humanizing the victims of the historical event in question. In the Holocaust Museum, each visitor is given a card with the name and image of a real survivor or victim of the genocide; the card matches with small plaques bearing the name of the survivor placed throughout the museum to tell the story of that individual's experience of the Holocaust. In the Nanjing Massacre Museum, the walls of the entrance hall are filled with the pictures of victims before the massacre, and to emphasize the magnitude of human life lost during the massacre, some walls are lined with shelves of books marked with the family names of the victims. Both museums humanize the victims and survivors of atrocities from the outset so that the statistics, shocking images and displays to come resonate with visitors on an emotional rather than just intellectual level.

After humanizing victims, both museums give a factual analysis of events leading up to the atrocity in question; this part of the museum illustrates that the atrocity was a result of unwarranted aggression, but can also humanize the aggressor if that's the intention of the museum's creator. In the Holocaust Museum, films and displays chronicle the political and economic crises facing post-World War I Germany, the progressive rise of the German Nazi party, and the deep roots of antisemitism among Europeans. The Nanjing Massacre Museum, on the other hand, gives a shorter and more text-based overview of the events leading up to the Nanjing Massacre. Its displays focus less on the aggressor's mindset or motives and more on the chronological order of the Japanese attack on Nanjing, with maps to illustrate the offensive and defensive maneuvers of the Japanese Empire and Chinese Republican forces respectively. Placards explaining the course of the Japanese invasion of Nanjing frequently allude to the tragic weakness of China's military, which, despite valiant efforts, was unable to resist the Japanese offensive and defend the nation; today, China has one of the largest and fastest growing militaries in the world. The differing levels of emphasis on the humanity of the aggressor put on display in these two museums reveals part of the lessons each museum is trying to teach: for the Holocaust Museum, that a descent into brutality can occur anywhere, and for the Nanjing Massacre Museum, that the Chinese military of the time was simply too weak to protect the Chinese nation from barbarity.

The following part of both museums is an examination of the event or atrocity itself; this is where some of the most shocking displays of the museum are found. In the Holocaust Museum, there are models of concentration camps and gas chambers,

witness and survivor testimonies played on film, photos and films of the actual atrocities, and a full-scale model of a train carriage like that which Holocaust victims were forced into. The equivalent part of the Nanjing Massacre Museum is made up of two rooms, the first has a model city under attack for visitors to walk through. The second, has films and photos of the massacre, witness testimonies played on film, and most poignantly, the museum floor stops after a few meters; the bottom below is open, surrounded by a small circular cement wall which lets visitors look down and see an uncovered mass grave.³⁹ The skeletons are uncovered, clearly belonged to both adults and children, and marked only by numbers.

Both museums also make a point, in this section, to relate the most awful stories of the event as well as the most inspiring ones. The Nanjing Massacre Museum dedicates a set of displays to the two Japanese generals who held a competition to see how many Chinese people each could decapitate, but also has an entire room dedicated to the foreigners who saved hundreds of Chinese civilians during the massacre. The Holocaust Museum has a set of displays about the sadistic Dr. Mengele, who carried out experiments on child prisoners in the Auschwitz concentration camp, but has many more displays dedicated to people who showed a sense of bravery and saved people persecuted by the Nazis. Both museums more prominently display the bravery and humanity of select individuals during the Holocaust or Nanjing Massacre than they do the sadism and inhumanity of other individuals. The Holocaust Museum even features the witness testimony of a woman

³⁹ Yet another mass grave is put on display later; the second mass grave is displayed at the center of its own small building near the end of the museum.

who was saved by a Nazi prison guard. There is no comparable display in the Nanjing Massacre Museum; out of all the people who are praised for their bravery during the Nanjing Massacre Museum, none are Japanese.

The two museums have very different ways of presenting graphic images to their visitors. Both museums are attended by visitors of all age groups, but the Holocaust Museum shows more consideration for their young visitors by hiding the most shocking images and films of the Holocaust behind tall slabs of cement; the idea being that only adults would be tall enough to peer over the cement slabs and see the graphically violent images and films. Near the entrance of the museum, there is a miniature museum specifically created for young visitors. The miniature museum tells the story of the Holocaust through the relatable character of Daniel, a fictional Jewish child whose family is persecuted by the Nazis. The miniature museum helps children understand what the Nazi persecution of the Jews felt like, but it does so without the inclusion of any graphic imagery whatsoever. The miniature museum is designed to look like a small German town, and the scenery changes as Daniel's family is first moved to a Jewish ghetto and then Auschwitz concentration camp.

The Nanjing Massacre Museum, on the other hand, puts shocking images, films, and displays in full view of all visitors regardless of their age; during my visit to the museum, certain parents felt the need to cover the eyes of their children when walking through certain parts of the museum. Only the first mass grave is surrounded by a small cement wall, the second is not. Children are undoubtedly some of the most impressionable members of our society, and the museum's decision to expose all their visitors, regardless of age, to such graphically violent images and films reveals one of

the museum creator's main objectives: to shock. The message these images collectively communicate is that without the protection of a strong government, the Chinese nation is at the mercy of savages. The Holocaust Museum clearly makes more of an effort to expose the humanity of the aggressors than does Nanjing Massacre Museum. The effect is that visitors to the Holocaust Museum are encouraged to relate to the Germans and recognize the universal potential people have to be brainwashed and act inhumanely, whereas visitors to the Nanjing Massacre Museum are more likely to perceive Japanese aggressors as savages who must never be allowed to threaten China again.

The final section of most memorial-museums presents the aftermath of the historical event including survivor stories, reactions of the international community to reports of the event, government investigations and cover ups. The Nanjing Massacre Museum displays newspaper clippings of various international journals that reported on the massacre and, most significantly, the Japanese efforts to cover up and downplay such reports. This part of the Nanjing Massacre museum helps explain many of the museum's methods of presenting this painful segment of history; the museum is built on a mass grave and prominently displays shocking images of the massacre as a rebuke to the once commonly held Japanese belief that the massacre never happened or that it was not as awful as evidence indicated. The Holocaust Museum presents a similar set of displays to illustrate international reactions to reports of the genocide and has temporary exhibits which specifically explain the American response. The Holocaust Museum invites its visitors to think of humanitarian crises currently occurring around the globe as potential genocides

waiting to happen. It incites vigilance among its visitors to make sure an event as horrific as the Holocaust never happens again.

The Nanjing Massacre Museum, on the other hand, gives a more abstract conclusion to their presentation of the massacre. Near the end of the museum, visitors are led out of the main building and conducted to smaller one whose center displays a mass grave. The final room is a dark space with small lights and a recorded voice speaking the names of victims; it leads visitors out of the museum through a corridor that gives way to a grand garden. A reflecting pool runs through the center, and it's surrounded by white pebbles and, at the far end, a large marble Statue of Liberty-like mother holding a dove in one outstretched hand and a child in the other. The museum creates an experience where visitors literally see light at the end of a dark tunnel, and the bottom of the marble statue is inscribed with the characters 和平, peace. The Nanjing Massacre Museum does not invite its visitors to look out for other humanitarian crises as much as the Holocaust museum does. The Nanjing Massacre Museum most focuses on the idea that the humanitarian crisis they're presenting really did occur and that the Nanjing Massacre demonstrates the need for a strong Chinese government that successfully protects the nation from foreign aggression. The museum in Nanjing presents a fairly undiluted national story while the Holocaust museum in D.C. is more consciously global in its message.

At the exit of the two museums, I carried out interviews of certain attendees. I looked for visitors of different age groups, and particularly family groups with young children. I asked attendees a series of common questions about their impressions of the museum, which parts of the museum were most poignant, and whether they

thought it was appropriate for young children to be exposed to such violent history. Most interviewees at the Holocaust Museum thought the section which presented the Nazi rise to power was the most poignant because they saw parallels between the social currents which shaped pre-war Germany and those which are currently manifested in the United States; the museum-memorial had inspiring self-critique. Interviewees at the Nanjing Massacre Museum answered that the most poignant parts of the museum were the survivor testimonies, the mass grave, and the marble statue of a woman holding a dove and child. The emotional displays had connected with visitors more so than the maps and panels explaining the facts of the event.

Interviewees at both the Holocaust Museum and the Nanjing Massacre Museum believed that despite the horrific nature of the Holocaust and Nanjing Massacre, children must absolutely learn about the events in question because the history of their nation is wrapped up in these awful events. One interviewee at the Nanjing Massacre Museum explained that despite her daughter's young age, the museum's exhibits could teach her history through emotion, a medium accessible to all individuals of all ages. This response helped crystalize my own impressions of the Nanjing Massacre Museum and Holocaust Museum; the museums were both set up to teach history by not only presenting facts, figures and maps, but by engendering visceral emotional responses from their attendees. The Nanjing Massacre Museum might do so more boldly than the Holocaust Museum, where steps were taken to ensure that only adults could see the most shocking images of the museum, but both museums at times relinquished their academic tone in favor of engendering strong emotional responses in visitors. The danger with this approach is that it sometimes

comes at the expense of historical accuracy and nuance, and it makes people vulnerable to manipulation; when people are overwhelmed, they essentialize. What's more, the Nanjing museum more authoritatively states what visitors should take away from their visit, while the D.C. Holocaust museum tries to more subtly lead visitors to a conclusion. Perhaps there is an equivalence here in objectives, but a different means of achieving the goals based on the two governments' different claims to power.

Reading this essay should prompt any person to visit history museums more critically in the future, paying attention to the different factors that influence one's experience at the museum and what the museum says about its society's historical narrative. People should not passively consume the information presented to them at museums because museum designers are actively trying to convey a message through implicit and explicit means. Visitors need to match the level of intentionality the designers used when creating the museum; actively and critically observing a museum's installations rather than just strolling through. Museum designers and curators, on the other hand, must find the courage to remain politically independent and fundamentally academic in their presentation of history.

One might think history museums present facts, but museums inevitably present a historical narrative that's been instrumentalized for nationalist ends by the society's government. Governments instrumentalize history to promote a self-glorifying image, and they use emotional rather than intellectual engagement with people to seed their nationalist historical narrative. The Nanjing Massacre Museum echoed the Chinese government's narrative of victimization and the need for China to assert itself – a narrative which casts the Communist Party as the rejuvenators of the

Chinese nation— whereas the Holocaust Museum echoes the American government's historical narrative of a nation bound in some part by its refutation of nationalism.

These two historical narratives imply the potential for a future conflict between China and the United States because universalism fundamentally conflicts with a nation's assertion of sovereignty. Can China and the United States remain amical rivals despite these conflicting worldviews?

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