

# Intergroup Forgiveness and the Nanjing Massacre: Influence of Online Reviews on the Attitudes of Nanjing and Non-Nanjing Citizens toward Japanese

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## **Abstract:**

Among the events of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), one of the best known and most notorious is the Nanjing Massacre, carried out by Imperial Japanese troops during December 1937–January 1938. This event has produced ongoing feelings of anger and distrust; but the need to distinguish between Japanese militarists and ordinary Japanese people has been highlighted. In the area of forgiveness, the topic of the Nanjing Massacre has particular relevance for the recent field of intergroup forgiveness. The research team randomly selected people in shopping malls, residential areas, and cafés to participate in the study. The sampling process lasted for 3 months. Initially the study selected 183 residents of Nanjing, Shanghai, Xi'an, Wuhan, Jinan, and Suzhou, and the final effective number of participants was 152. Among them, 72 identified as Nanjing citizens and 80 as non-Nanjing citizens. This participants first read news articles and online reviews and then filled out the Intergroup Forgiveness Questionnaire. For authenticity, news articles were selected from the official Weibo account called @Memorial Hall of the Victims of the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders, which is related to the annual national memorial ceremony for the massacre's victims. Online reviews of the articles with directional characteristics were created. Therefore, based on the classification of directional characteristics, each review was considered either positive, neutral, or negative. The results revealed the following: (a) The directionality (positive, neutral, or negative) of online reviews significantly affected the level of participants' intergroup forgiveness; (b) the influence of online reviews on intergroup forgiveness varied according to whether or not the respondent was a resident of Nanjing; (c) compared to non-Chinese groups, Chinese respondents showed lower levels of intergroup forgiveness as a result of their perceptions of the historical event as well as cultural and political differences. Based on the findings, we suggest that in future research on intergroup forgiveness there can be further focus on areas such as cultural background, and development of new measurement tools, and intervention models. In addition, this study has room for improvement in two aspects. First, in addition to directional features, online reviews have other characteristics. Specifically, those based on objective facts tend to be convincing, but those based on subjective sentiment are less so. Thus, the effect of online reviews on intergroup

forgiveness was not examined from a multidimensional perspective in our study. Second, the sample size was relatively small, and included just six cities; thus, the representativeness of the sample needs improvement.

**Keywords:** *Online review, Intergroup forgiveness, Nanjing Massacre; Intergroup Forgiveness Questionnaire.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Among the events of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), one of the best known and most notorious is the Nanjing Massacre, carried out by Imperial Japanese troops during December 1937–January 1938. This event has produced ongoing feelings of anger and distrust; but the need to distinguish between Japanese militarists and ordinary Japanese people has been highlighted. For example, General Secretary Xi, in addressing those attending the annual national memorial ceremony to commemorate the massacre’s victims, said, “We should not hate a nation only because there are a few militarists who have launched a war of aggression. The culpability of the war rests with a few militarists rather than the people of the country” [1]. In light of this suggestion that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Chinese should not hate the Japanese people because of the historical actions of a few individuals, in the area of forgiveness, the topic of the Nanjing Massacre has particular relevance for the recent field of intergroup forgiveness.

*Intergroup forgiveness* refers to reducing group members’ feelings of revenge, anger, and distrust toward outside groups that had previously invaded the group; it is also a group mental process wherein group members seek to actively understand, approach, and participate in the outside groups [2-4]. The process of forgiveness of an outside group is affected by many factors, which, in some studies [5-7] have been summarized as group cognition (e.g., inner group bias cognition and low humanization cognition), group emotion (e.g., group anger and group empathy), and group behavior (e.g., apology and group contact).

Yang indicated that articles in the news media can exert a great influence on either the resolution or deepening of group conflict. In the doctor–patient context [8], for example, news articles in which a positive image of medical workers is presented can increase public trust in hospitals and doctors, whereas articles in which a negative image is presented can greatly reduce such trust and can worsen the doctor–patient relationship [9]. Therefore, in this study we considered the role of articles in the news media in the context of intergroup forgiveness.

In some studies it has been found that online reviews of certain reports can significantly affect readers’ perceptions [10-11]. E. Kim and Rhee [12] found that readers tended to judge the direction of public opinion by reading online reviews and then form their own opinion. Lim and Van Der Heide [13] considered online reviews to be directional, dividing them into positive and negative directions. Another study further divided the direction of online reviews into supportive, nonsupportive, and neutral directions

[14]. Accordingly, another focus of the present study was to consider whether the directionality of online reviews of articles related to the Nanjing Massacre affect the level of intergroup forgiveness. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** The directionality of online reviews will significantly affect the level of intergroup forgiveness among readers of articles in the news media.

Regarding the Nanjing Massacre, it has been suggested that Nanjing citizens who were deeply affected by the incident will naturally feel more hateful toward Japan; that is, their level of intergroup forgiveness will be low. Yet, a video on Youku, one of China's largest video websites, showing “a Japanese girl asking for help in the streets of Nanjing” ([https://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XNDYwMjY0ODgxMg==.html](https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDYwMjY0ODgxMg==.html)) seemed to greatly change people’s perceptions. In the video, the girl worries that she will be shunned by local citizens because she is Japanese. To her surprise, however, Nanjing citizens were willing to assist her when she asked for help on the streets. In the video, one Nanjing citizen says, “We Chinese are very rational about it [the Nanjing Massacre] since it is a thing of the past and has nothing to do with [contemporary] Japanese citizens.” Hence, another focus of this study was whether or not differences exist between Nanjing and non-Nanjing Chinese citizens regarding intergroup forgiveness in the context of the Nanjing Massacre. L. H. Zhang [15] conducted a long-term study of the survivors of the Nanjing Massacre and found that even they held tolerant attitudes. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** The influence of online reviews on intergroup forgiveness will vary according to region. The level of intergroup forgiveness to Japanese of citizens of Nanjing will be higher than that of citizens in other locations in China.

Regional differences exist not only between Nanjing citizens and non-Nanjing citizens, but also between Chinese people and other groups. Forgiveness has its own cultural implication, early models of forgiveness and the strategies to promote forgiveness that are drawn from them are predominantly individualistic in origin. In the 21st century, some researchers have proposed models that clarify the relationship between collectivism and forgiveness [16]. Commonly, forgiveness in a collectivistic culture is different from that in an individualistic culture, intergroup forgiveness the same: Hanke et al. compared intergroup forgiveness among participants in mainland China and in some other countries and found that the degree of intergroup forgiveness was lowest among those in mainland China [17]. Chen [18] also found that anger is the main social emotion in China regarding the Nanjing Massacre. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3:** Compared to non-Chinese groups, Chinese people will show lower levels of intergroup forgiveness as a result of perceptions of historical events.

## II. METHOD

### 2.1 Participants

The research team randomly selected people in shopping malls, residential areas, and cafés to participate in the study. First, the research team asked the selected individuals if they would like to participate in the survey. After receiving a positive response, the researchers asked if the person was familiar with the historical Nanjing Massacre. Those who indicated they were aware of the event were selected as participants.

The sampling process lasted for 3 months. Initially we selected 183 residents of Nanjing, Shanghai, Xi'an, Wuhan, Jinan, and Suzhou, and the final effective number of participants was 152. Among them, 72 identified as Nanjing citizens and 80 as non-Nanjing citizens (the classification standard was based on their registered location and did not include temporary or work-related residences). There were 66 men and 86 women, and the age range of the sample was from 17 to 74 years, with an average of  $32.03 \pm 12.36$  years.

This study was approved by the ethics committee of the researcher's unit. In addition, before the selected people participated in the study, they each signed an informed consent form. On the informed consent form, they were told that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

### 2.2 Instrument and Measure

#### 2.2.1 News articles and online reviews

For authenticity, news articles were selected from the official Weibo account called *@Memorial Hall of the Victims of the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders*, which is related to the annual national memorial ceremony for the massacre's victims. Online reviews of the articles with directional characteristics were created. Lai and Zhufound that if the opinions expressed by two or more online reviewers are consistent (i.e., the contents of the reviews mutually confirm each other) [19], the effect of information spread will be greater than that of a single review, and such information also has greater credibility for the reader. Therefore, based on the classification of directional characteristics, each review was considered either positive, neutral, or negative. Examples include the following: "The evil of war is in Fascism, and the Japanese people are also victims" (positive); "Do not forget the national shame, cherishing peace" (neutral); and "Japanese committed a deep sin and cannot be forgiven" (negative).

#### 2.2.2 Intergroup forgiveness questionnaire

We adopted the Intergroup Forgiveness Questionnaire that Moeschberger et al. developed to study intergroup forgiveness in the context of ethnic conflicts in Northern Ireland [20]. For this study, the background of the intergroup conflict was changed from Northern Ireland to the Nanjing Massacre. For example, "Forgiving Japanese for past wrongs would be disloyal to my community"(R), "We Chinese can

only forgive members of Japanese when they have apologized for past violence.” The questionnaire contains seven items, each scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = “*completely agree*” to 5 = “*completely disagree*”. Based on reverse scoring for four of the items, the higher the total score for all items, the higher the level of intergroup forgiveness. In this study, the internal consistency coefficient of the questionnaire was 91.

In our study, the items in the Intergroup Forgiveness Questionnaire were translated from English to Chinese. On the one hand, some researchers had already translated the questionnaire into Chinese and tested its reliability and validity in Chinese groups. The results showed that the Chinese version of the questionnaire met the psychometric indexes [21-22]. On the other hand, in current study, we invited three foreign students in China whose mother tongue is English to translate the Chinese version of the questionnaire back to English, so that we could compare it with the original version.

### 2.3 Research Design and Process

In this study we used a  $3 \times 2$  between-subjects design. The independent variables were the directionality of the online reviews (i.e., positive, neutral, or negative) and the place of residence of the participants (Nanjing citizen or non-Nanjing citizen). The dependent variable was the participants’ level of intergroup forgiveness (i.e., the scores on the Intergroup Forgiveness Questionnaire).

To ensure the validity of the manipulation of online review directionality (i.e., the independent variable), prior to the study, 50 college students were invited to score nine online reviews (three positive, three neutral, and three negative reviews). Directionality was scored from 0 to 10, where “0” means completely negative, and “10” means completely positive. After confirming the validity of the independent variable, the formal experiment was initiated (i.e., participants were selected, the research was explained to them, and their registered location was determined). The researchers delivered news articles and screenshots of online reviews of the articles to the participants. Each participant read one online review with a randomly selected direction, and each participant read one article and three reviews, each under the same directional condition. Once the participants finished reading the news articles and online reviews, they received the Intergroup Forgiveness Questionnaire, which they completed and which the researchers collected on the spot. Participants each received a small souvenir for their participation.

## III. RESULTS

### 3.1 Validation of Manipulation of Online Review Directionality

The results of the manipulation of the directionality of online reviews showed no significant differences between the three reviews under each directional condition ( $F_{\text{positive}} = 1.50$ ,  $p_{\text{positive}} = 0.233$ ;  $F_{\text{neutral}} = 0.49$ ,  $p_{\text{neutral}} = 0.619$ ;  $F_{\text{negative}} = 1.26$ ,  $p_{\text{negative}} = 0.292$ ). Then, the average scores of the three reviews under each directional condition were calculated, and the differences in the average scores for the three

directional conditions were compared. The results showed a significant difference between the three average scores ( $F_{\text{average score}} = 452.99$ ,  $p_{\text{average score}} < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.85$ ). Results of further post hoc tests indicated that the average score for positive reviews was significantly higher than that for neutral and negative reviews; the average score for neutral reviews was also significantly higher than for negative reviews. These results indicate that the manipulation of the independent variable (directionality of reviews) was effective.

### 3.2 Participant Homogeneity Test

In this study we used a between-subjects design ( $3 \times 2$ ); thus, there were six treatments. To ensure the homogeneity of the participants in each group before the treatment, we conducted a homogeneity test for each group. Table 1 shows the data from the homogeneity test. Among the six groups, there were no significant differences in either age ( $F_{\text{age}} = 0.83$ ,  $p_{\text{age}} = 0.529$ ) or gender distribution ( $\chi^2_{\text{gender}} = 2.85$ ,  $p_{\text{gender}} = 0.723$ ).

**TABLE I. Data from the participant homogeneity test**

	Positive review		Neutral review		Negative review	
	Nanjing ( <i>n</i> = 24)	Non-Nanjing ( <i>n</i> = 29)	Nanjing ( <i>n</i> = 24)	Non-Nanjing ( <i>n</i> = 27)	Nanjing ( <i>n</i> = 24)	Non-Nanjing ( <i>n</i> = 24)
Age (in years; <i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i> )	29.83±12.86	31.72±14.81	30.54±9.62	31.00±11.15	33.13±11.59	36.17±13.26
Gender (number of men/women)	11/13	9/20	11/13	11/16	12/12	12/12

### 3.3 Results of Descriptive Statistics

Table II shows the data for the means and standard deviations of the directionality of the review (independent variable) under each of the six treatments.

**TABLE II. Results of descriptive statistics for directionality of the online review**

	Positive review ( <i>n</i> = 53)	Neutral review ( <i>n</i> = 51)	Negative review ( <i>n</i> = 48)
	<i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i>
Nanjing citizens	21.58±8.40 ( <i>n</i> = 24)	20.50±6.97 ( <i>n</i> = 24)	20.00±6.42 ( <i>n</i> = 24)
Non-Nanjing citizens	22.83±6.32 ( <i>n</i> = 29)	18.52±6.76 ( <i>n</i> = 27)	13.71±7.89 ( <i>n</i> = 24)

### 3.3 Main Effects and Interaction Effects of Directionality of the Online Review and Place of Residence

A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed with the participants' scores on the Intergroup Forgiveness Questionnaire, with online review directionality and participant place of residence (Nanjing citizen or not) as the independent variables and questionnaire score as the dependent variable. The results showed that the main effect of the directionality of online reviews was significant ( $F_{\text{review directionality}} = 7.06$ ,  $p_{\text{review directionality}} = 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.11$ ), the main effect of participants' place of residence (Nanjing citizen or not) was also significant ( $F_{\text{area}} = 4.08$ ,  $p_{\text{area}} = 0.045$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.08$ ), and both interaction effects were significant ( $F_{\text{interaction effect}} = 3.51$ ,  $p_{\text{interaction effect}} = 0.032$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.07$ ).

Using the simple effect test based on Bonferroni correction, Figure 1 shows that for Nanjing citizens, the level of intergroup forgiveness was not significantly affected by the directionality of online reviews ( $p > 0.05$ ), and their forgiveness was at a relatively high level. However, for non-Nanjing citizens, the directionality of online reviews significantly affected their level of intergroup forgiveness. Specifically, regarding the level of intergroup forgiveness among non-Nanjing citizens, there was a significant (or nearly significant) difference between the positive-review condition and the other two review conditions ( $p_{\text{positive-neutral}} = 0.076$ ;  $p_{\text{positive-negative}} < 0.01$ ), and a significant (or nearly significant) difference between the neutral-review condition and the other two review conditions ( $p_{\text{neutral-negative}} = 0.052$ ). In short, when the review direction was positive, the level of intergroup forgiveness among readers from regions outside Nanjing was not that different. However, when the review direction was neutral or negative, and especially when it was negative, the level of intergroup forgiveness among readers from outside Nanjing varied significantly.

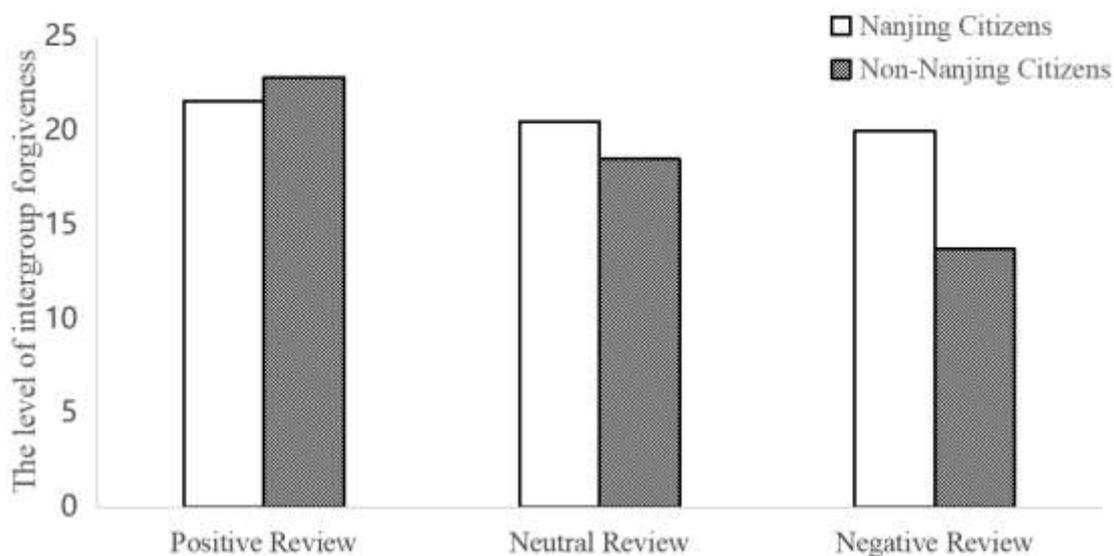


Fig 1: The interaction effect of directionality of review and place of residence on level of intergroup forgiveness

### 3.4 Comparison of Intergroup Forgiveness between Chinese and Other Groups

To investigate differences in Intergroup forgiveness between Chinese people and other groups in another country or culture, the data for the neutral-review condition were compared with the data reported by Leonard et al. in their study on peace building in Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the basis of controlling the influence of online review directionality[23]. Leonard et al. used the same Intergroup Forgiveness Questionnaire as we used in the present study, but the participants in that study included people of different religious groups, such as Muslim, and Christian (Catholic and Orthodox). The result of a one sample  $t$  test showed that, compared to the Muslim group, who had the lowest level of intergroup forgiveness ( $M = 22.75$ ,  $SD = 6.10$ ), in the neutral review condition in our study the level of intergroup forgiveness ( $M = 19.45$ ,  $SD = 6.86$ ,  $n = 51$ ) was also significantly lower ( $t = -3.43$ ,  $p = 0.001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.51$ ).

## IV. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Regional Differences in the Effects of Directionality of Online Reviews on Intergroup Forgiveness

The results in our study indicated that the directionality of online reviews had a significant effect on the level of intergroup forgiveness among readers of a news report about the Nanjing Massacre. Specifically, the level of intergroup forgiveness was higher with positive online reviews and lower with negative reviews. Yang found that online reviews had a deeper influence on readers than did the news articles themselves [8]. Lee and Jang found that if the opinions expressed in online comments and news reports are inconsistent [11], the readers of the news item prefer to form their own view on the event based on the views expressed in the online comments.

In addition, when the review direction was positive, the level of intergroup forgiveness among readers from areas of China outside Nanjing was not that different. However, when the review direction was neutral or negative, especially when it was negative, the level of intergroup forgiveness among readers from outside Nanjing varied significantly. In various studies, the researchers have found that news report readers pay more attention to negative or passive reviews and then form their own view on that basis [24-25]. To some extent, this also explains why different groups tend to show significant differences under the influence of negative reviews.

We found that the influence of the direction of online reviews on the level of forgiveness among the news-item readers varied according to place of residence. As shown in Figure 1, for non-Nanjing citizens, the level of intergroup forgiveness was relatively high when they had read positive online reviews and low when they had read negative online reviews. For Nanjing citizens, however, this effect was not evident. In other words, regardless of review direction, the level of intergroup forgiveness among Nanjing citizens remained at a relatively high level. This contrasts with the view that Nanjing citizens harbor deep resentment toward the Japanese.

L. H. Zhang similarly found that even survivors of the Nanjing Massacre held a tolerant attitude, perhaps because Nanjing citizens might have a more rational understanding of historical events [15]. In studies of intergroup forgiveness it has been found that if groups can contact each other, increase mutual understanding, and rationally understand violations, the invaded group will have a less negative perception of the invading group and develop an improved understanding, hence reducing negative emotions toward the out-group and promoting intergroup forgiveness [26-27]. The Nanjing government officilas regularly hold events to memorialize the victims of the Nanjing Massacre, the most representative of which is the annual December 13 national ceremony. By participating in such events, Nanjing citizens may have developed a more rational understanding of historical events; as suggested, for example, by the video described earlier in which a Nanjing citizen refers to the massacre as “a thing of the past.”

#### 4.2 Differences in the Level of Intergroup Forgiveness between China and Other Groups

We also found that the level of intergroup forgiveness among our Chinese participant group was relatively low compared to other groups, which aligns with previous research findings. For example, in a study based on the context of World War II, Hanke et al. compared intergroup forgiveness among people in mainland China, Chinese Taiwan, The Philippines, France, Russia, and Poland and found that intergroup forgiveness was the lowest among those in mainland China [17]. Such differences can be attributed to cultural differences. In Eastern cultures, the focus in forgiveness tends to be on the improvement of interpersonal or group relations, whereas in Western cultures the emphasis is on positive changes in the individual’s experience [28-29]. Therefore, for Chinese people, the level of intergroup forgiveness is relatively low when there has been no substantial improvement in the relationship between the two parties. In addition, political factors might also play a role, because an apology is an important factor in promoting intergroup forgiveness [1]. For example, some voices in the Japanese government, especially on the far right, have downplayed or even denied the massacre, which may contribute to a low level of intergroup forgiveness among Chinese people in regard to the Nanjing Massacre.

#### 4.3 Originality, Limitations and Future Research

In terms of originality, in this study, on the one hand, we have further enriched knowledge about influencing factors of intergroup forgiveness. In addition to the factors of group cognition, group emotion, and group behavior, which we identified in the introductory section of this paper [6,10] , in such an information age, online media also have a profound impact on people's cognition and emotion, including their intergroup forgiveness. On the other hand, although in previous studies a negative correlation has been revealed between interpersonal forgiveness and interpersonal transgressions [30-31], the result in our study that the Nanjing citizens’ level of intergroup forgiveness of Japanese was higher than that of non-Nanjing citizens, tells us that deeper harm does not necessarily mean greater ugly hatred. This result is a further proof of the difference between interpersonal forgiveness and intergroup forgiveness.

This study has room for improvement in two aspects. First, in addition to directional features, online reviews have other characteristics. For example, Filieri [32] noted that online reviews also have content-based features. Specifically, those based on objective facts tend to be convincing, but those based on subjective sentiment are less so [33]. Thus, the effect of online reviews on intergroup forgiveness was not examined from a multidimensional perspective in our study. Second, the sample size was relatively small, and included just six cities; thus, the representativeness of the sample needs improvement.

Intergroup forgiveness is a relatively recent field of study in forgiveness research. In addition to the above-mentioned limitations, the following aspects should be considered in future research. First, the cultural background of the research should be enriched. At present, the cultural background of intergroup forgiveness research is relatively simple as most studies have been based in a background of Western countries. Examples include intergroup forgiveness in Germany regarding those who were victims during World War II [34], and ethnic conflicts in the Balkans [23]. However, forgiveness has strong cultural characteristics and can vary between Eastern and Western cultures [29]. Thus, it can be difficult to apply the findings of Western studies to Eastern contexts; the present study's findings confirm this to some extent. Therefore, in future intergroup forgiveness research different cultural backgrounds should be taken into consideration. Second, the measurement tools for the research should be improved. Different from forgiveness research in which the focus is on interpersonal issues [35-36], where numerous mature questionnaires are available, the measurement tools used in intergroup forgiveness research are relatively simple; in some cases, intergroup forgiveness has been measured using only one item [37]. Moreover, existing intergroup forgiveness questionnaires can be difficult to apply across different contexts. Therefore, the development and improvement of intergroup forgiveness measurement tools is another direction for future research. Third, methods for intervention should be developed. Most researchers believe intergroup forgiveness can help alleviate conflicts between parties. However, interventions for intergroup forgiveness are still in the exploratory stage. Generally, intergroup forgiveness can be promoted by helping both parties better understand the harm caused by the conflict [3,38], by intervening in the forgiveness process via certain organizations [2], and by providing educational or other activities to increase intergroup contact and promote mutual understanding[39]. At present the focus in some intervention practices is on contradictions within a nation or an ethnic group and seeking to facilitate more contact between group members. However, conflicts between nations tend to be more politically complex, and people have fewer opportunities for contact. Therefore, methods for intergroup forgiveness intervention between different nations warrant further consideration.

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