

China's centuries of humiliation

Written by Jerome Keating
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Anyone who has been in Asia for any length of time cannot avoid having heard China's oft-repeated canard of its "century of humiliation." It is an ironic canard that usually comes up to defend China's current hegemony. The century referred to, of course, is the 19th century, when from the Opium Wars on up to the Boxer Rebellion, foreign powers pressured the weakening Manchu Qing government to open treaty ports and allow spheres of influence within major Chinese cities. The irony increases when it is used to garner sympathy, which works until one begins to examine more closely the surrounding details, where the anomalies begin.

In the 19th century, China was part of the Manchu empire, which included Tibet, Mongolia, Xinjiang and even a portion of Taiwan. At that time, a frequent cry of the Han Chinese was "Overthrow the [Manchu] Qing and restore the [Han] Ming." It was an understandable cry, coming from a conquered people seeking independence, but lost in the utterance was a corresponding fact: Different cries were ringing out at the same time in Tibet, Mongolia, Xinjiang and elsewhere. They too wanted to gain independence from the Manchus, but their own independence. As previously independent nations who were never part of the Ming Dynasty, they would hardly want restoration of the Ming if that meant falling under the rule of Han Chinese.

Purposely ignored by Han proponents is a different humiliation, in that many Han leaders had eagerly switched sides to join the Manchus. How otherwise could so few Manchus have conquered so many "loyal" Ming Han? Looking further between the lines of "overthrow the Qing, restore the Ming" is another twist: The oppressed Han in effect were saying "We despise the Manchus because they conquered us and so embarrassed us; but we also feel humiliated because while foreign nations in the 19th century are taking advantage of the weakening Manchu kingdom, we still remain under their yoke."

The irony deepens with the 1911 revolution in China. That revolution, for all practical purposes, remained stillborn; it became an attempt at democracy that never succeeded. It is true the 1911 revolution destroyed Qing rule, but a period of warlords and competing Leninist parties in a civil war followed. Further, those squabbling Ming proponents decided that while they had overthrown the Qing, they still wanted to keep the other lands that the Manchus had conquered: Tibet, Xinjiang and Mongolia.

Those people were not allowed to regain their freedom; instead they were forced under the Han yoke. Put another way, the Han ended their Manchu humiliation, but sought to continue

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the humiliation of the Tibetans, Uighurs and Mongolians. Only Outer Mongolia would escape, because it had an ally in Russia.

Examined closely, the proposed “century of humiliation” in actuality now serves as a distraction to effectively cover up and mask China’s second century of humiliation, the 20th. What most do not want to admit or face is that over a century has passed since Sun Yat-sen’s (孫逸仙) wish for a “government of the people, by the people and for the people.” That is 100 years and no progress has been made. True, there is a new government, but after 100 years, China has only replaced an emperor with an oligarchy and landowners with business tycoons. China did emerge from a Confucian agricultural society to become the “factory of the world,” but how deep is its progress?

Sixteen of the world’s top 20 polluted cities are in China; was that true during the Qing era as well? Wealthy privileged landowners are gone; privileged business tycoons and their princeling sons supplant them. Progress? The oligarchy has proved it can move quickly both in Tiananmen Square and the Olympics, but still harbors the belief that transparency is not necessary. Its “benevolence” and care for progress should be taken for granted and trusted just like that of past emperors.

If this is supposedly China’s century, why do snakeheads still exist? Why do those fleeing not wait till their golden age comes? What is their flight saying?

The past 100 years of suffering in China have basically been China’s doing; foreign powers cannot be blamed for the power struggles of would-be emperors within. More was destroyed in the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution than anything ever done to the Summer Palace by foreigners. Who shoulders that humiliation? The great helmsman Mao Zedong (毛澤東)? The destruction he wrought still cannot be faced because he supported the myth of the eternal return of the Middle Kingdom. Mao’s great famine? Do not talk too openly about that. That Mao is responsible for more Chinese deaths than the 30 million Chinese killed in the war with the hated Japanese? Ignore that as well.

Can current corruption be rooted out by the fiat of the politburo? Without transparency and the rule of law there is little chance of that. Simple fiats will not change the inner soul of the people. Does anyone remember when Mao outlawed prostitution — the “invention of the West?” How long was it eliminated? Did Mao and those around him practice what they preached?

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The new century of humiliation continues right now in China. Sun is honored in the breach, but his wishes are ignored; people have no more say in replacing the oligarchy than they did in replacing an emperor. Han rule has been restored, but is a new Dream of the Red Chamber being created?

China's neighbors are becoming more aware of its hegemonic ambitions, so what does this mean for a democratic Taiwan? China's 19th century of humiliation is present here only in the minds of some Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) waishengren (外省人) who fled here decades ago. The humiliation that Taiwanese need care about is how they recently had to suffer 40 years of White Terror and martial law under those waishengren and that some of them still want to bring Taiwan under the "benevolent humiliation" of China's oligarchy. Think about it.

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