

Taking China's Side

There has been an enormous amount of China-bashing in recent months, leading up to the Olympics. I'd like to put in a good word for China, something not that politically correct these days.

Sure, I wish the Chinese did not eat dogs, but we have pigs on our menu, and they are just as smart as dogs. Yes, I wish the Dalai Lama could return to Tibet, though the issue of Tibet is more complex than either the Chinese or the Dalai Lama makes it out to be. And the history of Tibet under the Buddhists not as ideal as some in the West believe.

Perhaps most of all I wish the Chinese would use strong pressure on Sudan regarding Darfur. And, of course, as a member of the American Civil Liberties Union, and a lifelong American dissident, I support the full and complete extension of human rights to every human being on this planet.

However, much of the coverage I've seen overlooks some painful Western history. I fell in love with China as a kid in Los Angeles, before ever tasting Chinese food. Why, I'm not sure. Perhaps it was reading Pearl Buck's *Good Earth*. Perhaps it was because I loved fireworks and firecrackers, and the ones we bought for July 4th were made in China. Whatever the reason, it certainly wasn't the culture of California, riddled with anti-Chinese and anti-Asian attitudes.

Let's remember, as Americans, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which was "progressive racism". At the time of our Gold Rush there was a flood of poor Chinese who came here, provided low wage labor, built our railways, did our laundry, but also became a scapegoat for low income workers who saw Chinese labor as competition. Some of the slogans of the time are chilling to remember:

"We want no slaves or aristocrats
The Coolie Labor System Leaves us No Alternative
Starvation or Disgrace
Mark the Man who Would Crush Us To the Level of the
Mongolian Slave
We All Vote Women's Rights and No More Chinese Chambermaids"

These were slogans carried by anti-Chinese demonstrators. In 1882, after decades of such agitation, and with the support of the progressives of the day, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, making it all but impossible for Chinese to come to this country.

But this was small change compared to what the rest of the world was doing to China. The Opium Wars of 1839 and 1856 resulted from a struggle between the Qing Dynasty of China, which sought to suppress the use of opium, and the British who had a monopoly on the opium trade and were determined to push that addiction on the Chinese.

China lost both wars, and had to grant the British "extraterritorial rights" (similar to the rights the Americans in Iraq enjoy today). So the civilized British who, like our own half-civilized resident, today lectures the Chinese on human rights, have forgotten that, for a profit, they were delighted to deal in opium.

The Boxer Rebellion at the turn of the last century saw an uprising by members of the "Chinese Society of Right and Harmonious Fists" against foreign influence. (They took the name "boxer" from the martial arts they used). The rebellion against foreign influence was serious enough. According to Wikipedia "In June 1900, the Boxers invaded Beijing and killed 230 foreign diplomats and foreigners."

Chinese Christians - who had also been targeted - and Westerners retreated to the legation quarter, putting up a two month struggle until a "multinational coalition rushed 20,000 troops to the rescue". The Boxer Rebellion was a serious challenge to outside influence and those outsiders (including Japan) were enthusiastic in sharing the burden of crushing the Chinese. There were 51 warships sent in (18 of them being Japanese, 10 being Russian). At least 55,000 troops were sent (Japan, with 20,300, sent the most, the Russians with 12,400 were second, and the British with 10,000 came in third. The Americans, not yet a world power, sent only 2 warships and fewer than 3500 troops.

China was crushed, humiliated, the last Chinese dynasty ended. Let me quote Kaiser Wilhelm II's July 27th order to his troops: "Make the name German remembered in China for a thousand years so that no Chinaman will ever again dare to even squint at a German."

Western intervention paved the way for the rise of Sun Yat-sen, who overthrew the Manchu (Qing) dynasty and established the Chinese Republic. But the Chinese Republic had a short and turbulent life. World War II did not begin in Europe - it began on July 7th, 1937, when the Empire of Japan launched a full scale invasion of China. It was this which I remember as a child, when our bubble gum came wrapped in horrific (and pro-Chinese) illustrations of Japanese atrocities. (Perhaps the chewing gum was made in China?). The infamous Rape of Nanking, in which thousands of Chinese civilians were raped and murdered by the Japanese military forces, still rankles in Chinese minds.

For a time Chiang Kai-Shek, who had succeeded Sun Yat-sen, cooperated with Mao and the Communists in fighting the Japanese. But at a crucial point Chiang turned on the Chinese, massacred thousands in a surprise attack, and the Chinese Civil War began in earnest, continuing until 1949, when Chiang retreated to Taiwan and the Chinese Revolution was complete. (Throughout that war, the US sided with Chiang Kai-Shek, supplying him with weapons and using US air power to move Nationalist troops into position against the Communists).

My sense is that there is a general agreement by military historians that Mao and his forces did a better job of fighting the Japanese than Chiang's Nationalists.

But the West was hardly ready to deal with China, a nation far more civilized than our own, or any nation in Western Europe. We denied China its seat in the Security Council. The US refused to "recognize" China. It was not until the famous visit to China by Richard Nixon that relations were finally normalized.

My view of China is not shaped by an enthusiasm for Maoism. (I do recommend Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* for a sympathetic view of the Chinese Communists, and I know my father, who served with Army Air Force Intelligence during the war, and was in China more than once,

was deeply impressed by the Chinese. More than that, my father, a devout Christian and political conservative, was baffled that the Chinese, in all their poverty and hunger, had a dignity and "sense of worth" that impressed him).

It is not the current Chinese State I endorse, but the long history of China, its remarkable accomplishments over thousands of years. I am embarrassed when the West chides China today, at a time when NATO is killing civilians in Afghanistan, and the US and Great Britain have, between them, laid waste to Iraq, one of the cradles of civilization in the Middle East.

It had long been my hope to visit China. I know, as the years pass, that goal won't be achieved. But from afar, and long before the Chinese Revolution, I was on the side of China. I don't even like sports, but I am glad the Olympics are a success. I compare the speed with which China dealt with the horrible disaster of its great earthquake this year with the total failure of George Bush to cope with Katrina.

I believe in human rights - but one of the most basic of human rights is the right to eat. China has paid a high price for its swift industrialization but it has given many of the people of China a chance at what we would call "the good life". I live in a country with the highest number of men and women behind bars of any nation in the world - I hesitate to make human rights in China my first priority. China is now one of the emerging great powers. It would be to our advantage to treat it with a sense of respect to which its several thousand years of civilization entitles it.

David McReynolds, 8/7/08