



CHINA'S 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF "RE-EMERGENCE"

Reflecting on the past

By Professor Jean-Pierre Lehmann – October 2009

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As my colleague Winter Nie points out in her article "**Celebrating an economic turn-around**", when Mao Zedong claimed victory in October 1949 he exclaimed "the Chinese people have now stood up". He also added: "Never will China be humiliated again". In reflecting upon the 60th anniversary of the Liberation, one must use the occasion not only to assess where China may be going to in the global firmament, but also – and perhaps especially, as behoves birthdays – where it has come from.

When Mao stated that never would China be humiliated again, as a Chinese nationalist and keen historian, he was acutely aware of China's shamed recent past. There are many distinctive (or "unique") characteristics about China. There is of course its 4,000-year history, its national unity stretching back to the Emperor Qin Shi-Huang in the 2nd century BCE. But also one must not forget its precipitate decline, indeed collapse, in the course of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries.

No nation, no civilization, fell from so high, so low, so quickly. As the Middle Kingdom, China correctly saw itself as the center of global civilization. Everything else was, to greater or lesser extents, barbarian. And while this state of affairs applied mainly to China's East Asian entourage, it also radiated as far as the West. There was an aura about China that greatly captivated Western imagination and admiration; this was true not only in the pages of Marco Polo's epic "Travels" in the 13th century, and continued in the accounts written by Jesuit missionaries from China in the 16th and 17th centuries, but also in the works of the philosophers of the 18th century European Enlightenment. China was rich in cultural and material terms.

The precipitate decline can be easily gauged from China's global economic standing. In 1820, shortly before the First Opium War, China accounted for 33% of global GDP. By the time Mao entered Beijing 60 years ago, it had fallen to somewhere in the region of 3%. In the interim, China can be said to have been "gang-raped". From being the center of the universe, China was repeatedly invaded – first by the British, then by the British again this time with the help of the French in the Second Opium War, then in the ensuing decades by virtually every other Western power and finally from the late 19th century onwards by the Japanese, in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 and most egregiously in the Nanking Massacre of 1937.

Though bits and pieces of the Chinese periphery were colonized – Hong Kong by the British in 1841, Taiwan in 1895 and then Manchuria in 1931 by the Japanese, with Tibet also being invaded by the British in 1904 – China per se, unlike India, was not colonized. In theory it remained a sovereign state. As the leader of the 1911 Revolution and founder of the first Chinese Republic, Sun Yat-sen stated, however, that China had become a "poly-colony". In other words, no single nation actually colonized China, but multiple nations cut out their spheres of influence and their own neo-colonial outposts. One of the features of these neo-colonial outposts were the "treaty settlements". These consisted of areas reserved for Westerners (and eventually Japanese) and that were under Western and not Chinese jurisdiction and jurisprudence. The Chinese that the Westerners came into contact with were mainly servants, employees and coolies. There is the story, though some claim it is apocryphal, that at the park in Shanghai next to the French concession there was a sign

reading "no dogs or Chinese allowed". China's "sovereignty" was mainly theoretical. In reality, it was everybody's puppet state.

Nonetheless the Chinese joined the allies in World War I. Inspired by the rhetoric of President Woodrow Wilson in respect to national self-determination, the Chinese were counting on being able to regain their territorial integrity. However, at the Paris Peace Conference, the Chinese discovered that the Germans' Chinese concessions were being secretly handed over to the Japanese (who were also on the allied side in WWI) and not restituted to China. This caused numerous riots and brought together Chinese nationalist reformist intellectuals who founded what came to be known as the May 4th (1919) Movement, which in turn lay the foundations for the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party two years later. It took another 30 years and a few months from the May 4th movement to the Liberation.

Many have argued that though the CCP was undoubtedly, at least in its initial phases, Marxist-Leninist and eventually Maoist, it was perhaps above all nationalist. Marxism-Leninism-Maoism was seen as the means (not an end) to restore China's place in the world and to liberate its people from feudalist and imperialist oppression.

While in the first three decades following Liberation under the reign of Mao there was some very bitter and quite violent ideological infighting between the so-called "capitalist roaders" and the Maoist fundamentalists, the battle remained essentially one of means – what was the best means to restore Chinese greatness? There was on the part of the Maoists a justified fear that if China chose the capitalist road, once again it would be flooded and overwhelmed by neo-imperialist foreign capital. In 1979, as the leading reformist intellectual Zheng Bijian noted: "The most important strategic choice the Chinese made was to embrace (sic) globalization rather than detach themselves from it."

It seems to have been indeed a very wise choice. China has soared in the global economy from virtually nowhere. Not only has it emerged as a major economic power, it has also resumed its position as a leading global nation. Once humiliated, China is now highly respected. But while the wounds of the past century-and-a-half of humiliation may have healed, the scars are still there.

This 60th anniversary constitutes an appropriate occasion for everyone, Chinese and non-Chinese, to reflect on the past. While conscious of the many daunting challenges ahead – in world economic, social and political affairs, but also especially in the face of climate change – the West and China (and of course other nations) must work together in a spirit of solidarity, understanding and respect. In seeking to go forward, ignoring history would be definitely perilous.

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