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The Chinese Century

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Bradford Literature Festival 2019

The Chinese Century panel, Sunday 30th June 2019
(Gregory B. Lee, Xinran, Astrid Nordin)



Photograph courtesy of Vanessa Lee

Gregory B. Lee : — Preliminary comments

When we talk about the “Chinese Century”, we are using an analogy to the “American Century”. But if the world has moved on, it has done so not only temporally but also in terms of its complexity and interdependence.

There will be no more centuries dominated by a single power: the current century will be about managing the climate emergency and the refugee crisis it will generate. In other words the ecological and political environment of the stage of the anthropocene are not those of the 19th and 20th centuries. While over the past five centuries the world has gradually been becoming uniform, or homogenous — we even call it the homogenocene — never has uniformity been so almost total.

The nation-state alone cannot provide the solution to our global, planetary problems. Someone recently retweeted something I’d written — unfortunately I can’t recall where I wrote it now — but it was this: “When we look at China, we look at ourselves”.

Everything we may wish to critic size about China, we can find in ourselves: the causes of climate change, religious and racial intolerance, mistreatment of minorities. Indeed, so-called “Western civilization” is built on these. But none of that is to minimise the Chinese Communist party-state’s oppression of its own people — and currently its horrific treatment of the Muslim minutes in China.

To resume, “China” — what we see and understand as China today — is a product of the industrial West. If 习近平 Xi Jinping’s China is today a big player at the G20 table, it is because the West — the UK in particular — sowed the seeds by invading and aggressing what was then the Manchu state’s territories (大清國 the “great Qing state”) during the 19th-century when the UK waged the Opium Wars.

In the mid-19th century Western aggression led to a growing nationalism — with against the Manchu rulers and the Western aggressors. Nevertheless, it seemed the only way to defeat the West was to adopt its practices — to imitate it. Hadn’t Japan just done that? This conviction was reinforced after World War One when the new Chinese Republic saw territories formerly colonized by defeated Germany handed over to Japan during the post-war Versailles Peace Treaty.

The China we see today then is the result of the emulation of Western colonial modernity. Colonialism did not deform China, it was its making, its creation after a Western model: a national consciousness, a common national language where one had not existed. Above the creation of “China” meant the reinventing the fragments into a national whole, reinventing ethnicity, to provide a dominant ethnicity in what was to be a multi-ethnic state.

Of course, one of the world’s big geo-political problems is the Chinese state’s intervention in the rest of the world. Here are some major issues we could discuss and how they play out in Latin America and Africa:

- Water
- Food production
- Cultural diplomacy/ the Confucius Institutes

In the subsequent discussion were mentioned:

The Westernization of China. We can no longer describe China as Westernized. It is just the way China is, integrated into a global spectacular society of consumption: Miss World, the Olympics, the Grand Prix, science and technology.

On the question of “democracy”, I described Western democracy as a liberal oligarchy. To achieve real democracy the way we govern ourselves must change. Also discussed was the question of the ideology of work, dear to the Chinese Community Party as it is to the West. That ideology which maintains current excessive levels of production and consumption must change.