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**“Deconstructing the Myth of the “Asian Way”;  
Instituting a Just History of Colonialism”**

The sense in which I use the notion of “intervention” in this paper goes beyond and perhaps around the recently developed juridico-political concept and practice of “humanitarian intervention” in an attempt to address the moral and historical problems surrounding the intervention of the West in the East, the North in the South. Intervention is not just via military force, nor in terms of food aid, it is also channelled through Western media (CNN, BBC, Skynews) which dominate and mediate Western perspectives of “humanitarian intervention.” The intervention that I see as necessary and fundamental is in the domain of human rights, and not only that leading to the maintenance of peace. But that said should not peace imply more than an absence of conflict, rather the institution of social stability and well-being, political and socio-economic rights? However, the right to intervene in questions of human rights, I argue, necessitates admitting responsibility of historical wrongs, without which there can be no moral or political authority to demand of others a respect for human rights today.

That human rights abuses exist in China, against all citizens and not only against “minorities” (Tibetans, Uighurs), that means of communication are monitored, that the abhorrent death penalty is widely practised for a multitude of crimes, nobody can deny and nobody should deny. The question is how and if we (whoever “we” is?) should intervene?

But should “we” impose our European “values” on those who claim to practice what has been termed the “Asian Way?” In response, I would argue that since the 19<sup>th</sup> century occupation – ideological, territorial, economic, and cultural – of what we call Asia, there has been no Asian way in terms of local, pre-modern, pre-Western institutions and practices. Furthermore, I would contest, that there never has been a Asian way, since in any case “Asia” as a discrete category and entity is entirely mythic: an invention, first, of the Western imaginary, second, of American and European area studies programmes financed starting in the Cold War to construct and study and object called “Asia,” and finally of twentieth and twenty-first century local, post-colonial, national authorities.

Of so-called culturally relativist “Asian values” which are supposed to imbue the “Asian way,” local political dissidents have a different appreciation. For those seeking to advance social, economic

and political rights, the “Asian way” is often no more than a mask for authoritarian procedures. The current PRC government's agenda of promoting the so-called “harmonious society,” which it is trying to extend into its international relations policy, is precisely a mask, a vehicle for obfuscating and tempering the unequal reality of China's economic miracle.

The modern Asian “nation-state” is a product of the confrontation with the West. It cannot now be undone, de-reified. It is a product of history. It cannot now be Asianized into some “pure” product of Asia. One concrete example would be the Hong Kong situation, where local citizens are demanding that China uphold its commitments to hold direct elections for the chief executive post in 2012. If the Hong Kong people are Asians, they are doubtless failing to follow the “Asian way.”

### ***Human rights in China***

Let me return, to the question of human rights in China. We could take as an example of inhumane practices in China the systematic deprivation of the citizen's liberty without trial: a widespread system that has been in place in various manifestations for the past 60 years, which is generally known as *Laogai*, reform through labour, now officially renamed « lao jiao » or “re-education through labour.” It is an administrative

detention without trial, which many Chinese experts claim violates China's own constitution.

Five years ago the Chinese government promised to reform the system which is used to imprison without trial petty criminals, petitioners (those who petition the authorities as the people used to petition the Emperor in feudal times usually in cases of administrative injustice) and so-called “troublemakers” who fall foul of local administrators. However, despite this promise, it remains in force throughout China.

Some sources estimate up to half a million people are held in such centres, others put the figure much lower at around 200,000. Hu Xingdou, a Beijing economist, says there are 300+ centres holding between 2,000 and 3,000 prisoners each. Since the 1950s it has been estimated that 40-50 million people have been incarcerated in, processed through, the “laogai” system – officially renamed “laojiao” in 1994. Most detainees are held for minor crimes : prostitution, burglary. But prisoners of conscience are also numerous. Among them is Zhang Haiyang, sentenced to 18 months for posting on the Internet the political rights petition Charter 08, based on the celebrated Czechoslovak dissident Charter 77. Zhang has tried in vain to challenge his sentence in the courts.

Some estimate that it may take 5-10 years to abolish the system.

First, because it is thought useful and necessary for the purpose of “stabilising society,” but perhaps also because “laojiao” produces immense profits since those in the system have to work and produce goods.

### ***Cyber-wrongs?***

In the virtual world too China's citizens are oppressed. I take no pride in having predicted 10 years ago the erection of the Great Fire Wall:

“Are the authorities in the process of building a firewall, a Cyber Great Wall to “protect” its citizens from the external Web?” I asked in 2001.

Beijing has since created an internet police employing some 40,000 agents whose job it is to police usage and to block searches and offending pages. On 29th December when Lu Xiaobo was sentenced to 11 years for having launched Charter 08, and searching for “11 years” on search machines would block one's computer and terminate one's internet programme. In December last year, with the excuse of clamping down on pornography a new wave of surveillance and restriction of access was implemented. I was in Peking at the time and even from my hotel broadband I was unable to access numerous pages (Facebook has been unavailable since the Uighur troubles in Xinjiang during July 2009). Even the word “belle” - the feminine form of the adjective for beautiful

in French - triggered the blocking mechanism.

Of course, from outside China we don't see or appreciate these restrictions on a medium that remains the citizen's main means of non-official connection and networking. This official policy is known as “waisongneijin” - relaxed externally vigilant internally. Even in the world of 3D virtual reality China's information scientists have been charged with creating a home alternative to the globalizing American-based Second Life.

Of course, such surveillance and intrusion into the human rights of individuals is not limited to China. As the renegade philosopher-sociologist-activist Guy Debord predicted over 20 years ago the mechanisms of state repression and surveillance are being harmonized while being screened behind a global pretence of expanding access to material plenty : what Debord called the “integrated spectacle.”

So how and on what bases can we as intellectuals intervene in the debate: as intellectuals that is in the sense that has prevailed since the late-nineteenth century, the intellectual as naturally engagé.

Rather than answer directly the question of the rights and wrongs of international agency and governmental intervention, I propose a reinforcement of public intellectual transworld concertation - for the problems of China are also the problems of France, the problems of Europe – all is a question of degree and of history.

For instance, in France too we suffer from abusive administrative detention – garde à vue – an entirely undemocratic mechanism for a country priding itself on its universal values.

In the UK over the past decade ordinary people have grown to know and even get used to oppression and excessive security measures, measures only known up until then by their fellow citizens in Northern Ireland. An oppression to which the Irish of the north had been subjected for 4 decades and before that the southern Irish for centuries.

Historically, European nations we have few lessons to give in the domain of human, and even less moral authority to give them. Witness the recent refusal of Nicolas Sarkozy to apologize for the complicity of the French in the genocide in 1990s Ruanda. Of course, how could he? If he did so he would be obliged to admit France's guilt in the war in Algeria, and beyond that in the crimes of French colonialism in Africa – crimes that the francophone poet and politician Aimé Césaire once likened to Nazism.

A civilization which proves to be incapable of resolving the problems that its operation creates is a decadent civilization.

A civilization which chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a sick civilization.

A civilization which cheats on its principles is a dying civilization.

The fact is that so-called “European” civilization, “western” civilization such as two centuries of bourgeois regime have fashioned it, is incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given birth: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem; that, handed over to court of “reason”, just as to the court of “conscience”; this Europe is powerless to justify; and that, more and more, it takes refuge in a hypocrisy the more odious since it has less and less chance of fooling

people.  
*Europe is indefensible.*<sup>1</sup>

### ***The case for history***

If governments like China's are to be tackled over their human rights record, then a new approach is needed that takes into account history. A recent declaration by a well-known 'new left' Chinese public intellectual, Wang Hui, illustrated the point I wish to make : “It will take centuries before the West understands China, like China understands the West.”

It is of course an exaggeration, and yet it is the case that China sees the West from a postcolonial perspective, and has had to absorb and negotiate a forced modernity.

The recent British condemnation of the execution of a British citizen, Akmal Shaik, for alleged heroin-smuggling – an execution which greatly distressed me also. But the reaction and determination of the Chinese authorities, and the ineptitude of the British authorities' responses needs also to be seen in an historical perspective: that of a country that suffered enormously from the imposition of opium addiction by the British authorities in the nineteenth century.

This an historical a narrative known to any Chinese school-child and anchored in the popular imaginary thanks to countless films and TV series that have endlessly recounted this story. But how many British

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<sup>1</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1955, p. 7.

people are aware of this history? For the British the Chinese have always been associated with drug-taking, after all the Chinese were the great opium addicts, weren't they?

Recently in Hong Kong, I tested my reading of the Chinese reaction to Britain's outrage concerning the Akmal Sahik affair. I had a conversation with the dissident poet Bei Dao who after 20 years of exile is still not allowed back into China proper, and barely tolerated in Hong Kong. No friend of China's authorities he agreed that ordinary Chinese did not appreciate the UK's position in this affair. That to talk about a British person selling drugs in China without recognizing the massive damage done to China, its people, its economy, its whole way of life by the imposed opium trade of the nineteenth century constituted an act of gross arrogance on the part of the British authorities.

In 1839, Lin Zexu, a celebrated Chinese official charged with terminating Britain's dumping of Indian-grown opium in China, wrote to Queen Victoria:

We find that your country is sixty or seventy thousand *li* [three *li* make one mile] from China. Yet there are barbarian ships that strive to come here for trade for the purpose of making a great profit. The wealth of China is used to profit the barbarians. That is to say, the great profit made by barbarians is all taken from the rightful share of China. By what right do they then in return use the poisonous drug to injure the Chinese people? Even though the barbarians may not necessarily intend to do us harm, yet in coveting profit to an extreme, they have no regard for injuring others. Let us ask, where is your conscience? I have heard that the smoking of opium is very strictly forbidden by your country; that is because the harm caused by opium is clearly understood. Since it is not permitted to do harm to your own country, then even less should you let it

be passed on to the harm of other countries - how much less to China!  
*Letter From Lin Zexu to Queen Victoria, 1839.*

The use of opium by British and other foreign imperialist authorities as a means of oppression and coercion, the resulting Opium Wars and as a consequence the British colonization of Hong Kong have all been embedded in the Chinese national imaginary for a century and half.

What is perhaps unexpected is the bifurcation of that representation of opium use in England on the one hand and on the other in the colonies, especially the port of Hong Kong obtained by the British as a result of the nineteenth-century Opium Wars fought over Britain's right to freely trade in opium in China. The effects of opiate substances on health, for instance, were represented differently depending on whether the Chinese concerned were to be found in Britain's Chinese colonies (Malay Straits, Singapore, Hong Kong) or in the colonial metropolis - in London and in Liverpool.

In Britain from the early to mid-nineteenth century onwards opium consumption which had been widespread especially in the form of laudanum, became taboo and constructed as an alien, indeed Oriental custom unworthy of Victorian citizens. Yet, at the same time in South-east Asia and Hong Kong, an official British imperial government campaign denied the noxious effects of opium. British colonial medical

health officers were at the forefront of those campaigns to maintain the consumption of opium and thus the financing of the British empire's administration east of Suez.

Thus, one and the same discourse of racial physical and mental difference could be used in England *both* to negatively construct the Chinese so as to promote strategies of segregation or exclusion (as had occurred in the USA in the second half of the nineteenth century), *and* in the colonies to justify and maintain practices that were forbidden to the white citizens of Britain but which were economically lucrative to the state machine in the Colonies. For while it had become imperative to the modern British nation-state to construct a healthy national body at home, the sickness of the non-white colonized body could be tolerated and indeed encouraged for reasons of colonial economic necessity.

Diplomats and politicians have little time for history lessons and even less for playing down their own great nation moral righteousness, but what I am suggesting is that if a new international dialogue were to be enabled, all propositions made by former colonialist powers would be prefaced by a recognition of historical realities and relations, and that yes apologies would need to be made in that process.

One of the great injustices of recent globalisation, of India's and China's 21<sup>st</sup> century economic emergence, is that the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century stories of massive colonial injustice are neglected, displaced, and that

without the British and other powers ever having admitted their historical responsibility.

What form would that acknowledgement take? Well first by putting the truth (yes truth) in school textbooks.

A similar story to that of Britain's opium trade in China, is anchored in the history of the USA – and is unknown to the vast majority of its population – Chinese exclusion.

## **China and America**

### *The context*

When Baudrillard declared in his *Amérique* (America) that twentieth-century America has no problem of identity, and that it did not “cultivate origins and mythic authenticity,” he neglected the ideological work of the nineteenth-century that inscribed the myth of America as the land of refuge welcoming those seeking justice and liberty.

The historical reality is that that myth of America as a generous haven for all the world's downtrodden which is so much a part of its modern identity, and is even inscribed in the form of the words of Emma Lazarus on the base of the Statue of Liberty, is founded on a lack of memory, not to say a lie.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, America had to re-imagine and reconstruct itself: to institute the imaginary America that Walt Whitman

had mapped out in verse. In order to do so post-bellum America, post-civil war America, now settled within its new northern and southern borders, and which had now “pacified the Far West” by practically annihilating the indigenous population, was in need of another vision of alterity against which to construct itself. This Other was to be found across the “American lake,” across the Pacific, in the form of the Celestial Empire, China.

Thus, China was imagined and represented as decadent, old, decrepit - a faded civilization ill-adapted to the new industrial and scientific world of which America would become the herald and the embodiment. But if China was decadent and backward so must be its people. So how was it possible to denigrate China without denigrating its people, and indeed its emigrants? And what place could such degenerate “untouchables” have in the new consolidated United States of America?

And so over a period of several decades propagandists and politicians militated for the legal and actual exclusion of Chinese from America. The project to exclude Chinese people from America, from citizenship, and from simply being American, started around 1850, was partly accomplished by 1870, with the Naturalization Act which denied the right of naturalization to Chinese, and was formally concluded with the adopting of Exclusion Act of 1882.

Furthermore, so as to protect Americans and Americaness in China, a legal and jurisdictional cocoon was constructed. In 1844 the United States became the first nation to demand and obtain extra-territorial rights for its citizens in China; a situation which ensured their immunity from Chinese law. Americans thus removed themselves from Chinese jurisdiction. Juridically Americans when in China were in America. By the same token, the Chinese were excluded even in their own country. By the turn of the century so naturalized and legitimate had this system of extraterritoriality become that Congress, in 1906, established the United States District Court for China, in China.

Academia made its contribution in the person of Andrew D. White, president of Cornell University, who lent his support to Senator Sargent, the prime advocate of the exclusionists in Congress. According to the 1877 congressional record, White expressed a "deep-seated dread of this influx of Asiatics of a type which it seems to me can never form any hopeful element in this nation."

In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act passed the House of Representatives with 201 votes in favour and a mere 37 against the measure. It thus became practically impossible for new Chinese immigrants to enter the country. After the 1882 Exclusion Act had been passed, there followed a second set of measures aimed at maintaining

American "purity": almost every state in the union passed anti-miscegenation laws preventing the marriage of whites with non-whites. As for the Chinese Exclusion Act, it was not finally repealed until 1943, and not until 1967 did the US Supreme Court declare anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional.

### *New colonizers*

But the colonizer in the early twentieth-first century, however, is no longer simply European, nor American, no longer only white. That is not to say that the new forms of domination are not largely in the hands of Europeans and Americans, for despite unprecedented Asian capitalist accumulation and expansion they are. But the old lessons of territorial colonization, and the material gains to be had, have been learned too well, to be simply abandoned. European colonialism, as an expansionist ambition of the state has been emulated in Asia and elsewhere. In the supposed era of post-colonialism when a new form of global capitalism has taken over, there are still colonizers who trample on the rights of supposedly inferior people, on so-called national minorities. The Indonesian authorities turned that country, a former Dutch colony, into a regional colonialist power and colonized and brutalized and murdered the people of East Timor, a former Portuguese colony.

Until the middle of this century Tibet fell under British imperial

dominance. Tibet came within the British sphere of influence. In 1950, in the name of liberation, revolution, and lifting the yoke of feudal oppression, in the name of modern, rational, scientific socialism, yet also in the name of ancient borders made possible by the conquests of feudal, imperialist dynasties the army of the People's Republic of China entered Tibet and made Tibet a modern colony of the New China. Whatever justifications the Chinese authorities may give, the fact remains that the Tibetans are considered an inferior race whose country's natural resources should be shared with the Han elder brother.

The old colonialisms were not yet in their graves when new ones emerged. Who is to blame? Have European thought so well learnt by China's new masters ever truly renounce the act and policy of colonization. When European powers "decolonized" their colonies did they do it willingly, or were they simply forced to? As we just mentioned, just last week President Sarkozy on a visit to Rwanda refused to apologize for France's rôle in the 1990s genocide in that country.. Sarkozy was also in 2005 a promoter of the French law that sought to have recognized the positive historical rôle of French colonialism.

In other words, European authorities have never given up the ideology of colonialism, have never sought to put it in question. European states, in condemning Asian governments colonizing acts, should, should they not, first look to themselves and their own colonial history for the

explanations?

America, as the world's policeman and saviour since the Second World War would take another hour to discuss. That America is far from putting question its strategy of principal interventionist arbiter and administrator of world order, the world order, has been recently illustrated by events in Haiti, and again last weekend in Chile. Watching the events evolve on BBC World and Skynews, I was not surprised to see that the first headline on the 6pm and 7pm news was not the fact of the earthquake itself but that the Whitehouse had said it was standing by to offer all necessary support. That two UK-based news channels should choose to prioritize America's rôle in Chile should come as no surprise after a decade of subservient disinformation not to say propaganda over events in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I would like to finish with a rather shocking quotation. Nevertheless this legitimate analysis from the late Aimé Césaire writing in 1955 after having spent some time studying the history of Europe and Africa on the spot:

....The very distinguished, the very humanist, the very Christian, twentieth-century bourgeois should realize that he harbours within an undeclared Hitler. Should realize that Hitler inhabits him....And that ultimately what he cannot forgive Hitler is not the crime against humanity per se, not the humiliation of man himself as such, but the crime against the white man. The humiliation of the white man, and to have been subjected in Europe to colonial procedures which up to then were only known to the Arabs in Algeria, Coolies in India, and Negroes in Africa.

And that is the main charge I make against pseudo-humanism: to have for too long reduced (/13) human rights, to have had and to still have a narrow and partial conception and ultimately sordidly racist conception of human rights.<sup>2</sup>

The world today is still dominated by a spectacular power imagined and still largely produced and directed by the USA and its European allies. At the same time other yet similar powers are emerging.

Our intervention as intellectuals needs to be transnational, any any international intervention should be historically informed, prefaced by a recognition of historical responsibilities, and should also be performed in a spirit of humility.

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<sup>2</sup> Césaire, pp.12-13