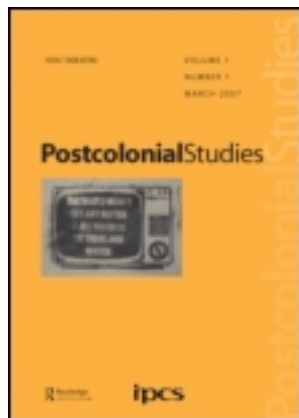


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# Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo and David Cameron's poppy

## Intervening in favour of human rights and the need for a just account of the history of international relations

GREGORY B LEE

The sense in which the notion of ‘intervention’ is used in this article goes beyond and perhaps around the recently developed juridico-political concept and practice of ‘humanitarian intervention’, or the ‘droit d’ingérence’, in an attempt to address the moral and historical problems surrounding the ‘intervention’ of the West in the East, the North in the South.<sup>1</sup> Intervention is not just a matter of intervening in terms of military force, or in terms of food aid; it also takes place via communication and political discourse mediated by Western media (CNN, BBC, Sky News) which dominate and shape or simply represent Western perspectives of ‘humanitarian intervention’. The question of intervention that this author deems fundamental is intervention in the domain of human rights, and not only that leading to the instauration or the maintenance of peace. In any case, peace implies more than simply an absence of conflict; it demands the institution of social stability and well-being, and political and socio-economic rights. However, the right to intervene in questions of human rights necessitates governments of nation-states which now demand compliance with a human rights agenda fixed by the West/North admitting historical responsibility for historically similar past, and present, wrongs. As Wallerstein or again Ziegler, have noted, the West has constructed its own lop-sided ‘humanity’.<sup>2</sup> Without a strategy to re-visit and re-write the history of recent Western colonialism, the West can command no moral or political legitimacy when it demands that others respect human rights today. As Ziegler has pointed out, the result is simply that Western/Northern states are held in disdain for their hypocrisy. But the ‘West... remains deaf, dumb and blind’ in the face of the demands and sentiments ‘founded on a deep desire for emancipation and justice emanating from the peoples of the South. It is incapable of understanding this hate. For the West’s memory is dominating and impermeable to doubt.’<sup>3</sup>

\*

That all citizens of China, and not only China’s ‘minorities’ (Tibetans, Uighurs and the 50 or so other minorities that remain unknown to all but

specialists outside of China), may suffer from human rights abuses, that means of mass and social communication are constantly monitored by the state, that the abhorrent death penalty is widely practised for a multitude of crimes, nobody can deny and no one should deny. The question addressed here is whether and how, and with what justifications, non-Chinese civil societies and governments should intervene. Should indeed the non-Asian world impose its European 'values' on those who claim to practise what has been termed the 'Asian way'?

From the outset, it should be made clear that since the nineteenth-century Euro-American occupation—ideological, territorial, economic, and cultural—of what we call Asia, there has been no Asian way, if by that is intended a homogeneous local, pre-modern, pre-Western set of institutions and practices. Furthermore, it can be argued that there *never* has been an Asian way, since in any case 'Asia' as a discrete category and entity is entirely mythical: an invention, first, of the Western imaginary; second, of American and European area studies programmes financed at first during the Cold War to construct and study an object called 'Asia'; and finally a re-invention of twentieth- and twenty-first-century local, post-colonial, national authorities.<sup>4</sup>

Of culturally relativist so-called 'Asian values' which are supposed to imbue the 'Asian way', local political dissidents may 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 People's Republic of China government's agenda of promoting the so-called 'harmonious society', which it is also carrying over into its international relations policy, is a mask, a vehicle for mediating, obfuscating and tempering the unequal reality of China's economic miracle.<sup>5</sup>

The modern 'nation-state' in Asia is a product of the confrontation with nineteenth-century Western powers. It cannot now be undone, cannot be de-ified. It is a product of history. It cannot now be Asianized into some 'pure', original product of Asia.

Societies in Asia are complex and diverse and fail to conform to a general model. One concrete example of failure to conform to an Asian model would be Hong Kong, where local citizens far from acquiescing have become increasingly active in their demands for political rights and in 2010 were demanding that China uphold its commitment to hold direct elections for the chief executive (head of the Hong Kong government) post in 2012.<sup>6</sup> If Hong Kong people are Asians, they are doubtless failing to follow the 'Asian way'.

To return to the question of human rights in China itself, the prime example of denial of basic human rights in China is 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. Deprivation of liberty has systematically been accompanied by reform through labour, known as *laogai* (*laodong gaizao*, reform through labour) or *laojiao* (re-education through labour).<sup>7</sup> *Laojiao* is an administrative detention without trial, which many Chinese legal experts claim violates China's own constitution.

While, for a number of years, the Chinese government has promised to reform the regime 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, the system remains in force throughout China, and seems unlikely to change:

Education, thought reform, productive labor, and behavioral change are flagship elements in day-to-day activities and programs for inmates across all correctional institutions. Regardless of domestic concerns and international criticisms, these elements do not seem to be changing their respective presence, weight, or influence in Chinese corrections in the years to come.<sup>8</sup>

Some sources estimate that 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 or more centres holding between 2,000 and 3,000 prisoners each. It has been estimated that since the 1950s, 40–50 million people have been incarcerated in, and processed through, the '*laojiao*'.<sup>9</sup> Most detainees are held for minor crimes such as prostitution and burglary. But prisoners of conscience are also numerous. Among them is Zhang Zuhua, detained on several occasions by the authorities, most recently for posting on the internet the political rights petition Charter 08, which emulates the celebrated Czechoslovak dissident Charter 77.<sup>10</sup>

The Charter sets forth 'Fundamental Concepts' of freedom, human rights, equality, republicanism, democracy and constitutionalism. The Charter also establishes a list of 'standpoints' which call for amending the constitution; the separation and the balance of powers; the democratization of the legislative process; the independence of the judiciary; the utilization of public institutions in the interests of the public; the protection of human rights; the election of public officials; the establishment of freedoms of association, assembly, expression and religion; the abolition of political education and its replacement by civic instruction; the protection of private property; fiscal reform; the creation of a universal social security system; protection of the environment; the establishment of a federal republic which would guarantee the Hong Kong and Macao systems, promote the rights of ethnic minorities and seek a negotiated settlement with Taiwan; and finally the payment of compensation to victims of PRC past political persecution and the release of current political prisoners and prisoners of conscience.<sup>11</sup>

As for Zhang Zuhua, he tried in vain to challenge his sentence in the courts and has been subjected to round-the-clock surveillance. Better known, especially since being awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, is Liu Xiaobo, who also participated in the drafting of Charter 08.<sup>12</sup>

Some estimate that it may take 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-rights?

In the virtual world too China's citizens are oppressed. The author takes no pride in having predicted 10 years ago the erection of the Great Fire Wall. When writing in 2001, the following question was posed: 'Are the authorities in the process of building a firewall, a Cyber Great Wall to "protect" its citizens from the external Web?'<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> On Christmas Day 2009 when Liu Xiaobo was sentenced to 11 years for having launched Charter 08, even the act of typing '11 years' into internet search engines would block one's computer and terminate one's internet programme. Also in December 2009, with the excuse of clamping down on pornography, a new surge in surveillance and restriction of access was implemented. The author was visiting Beijing at the time and even from an international hotel broadband connection was unable to access numerous pages (Facebook had been unavailable since the Uighur troubles in Xinjiang during July 2009), and even the word 'belle'—the feminine form of the adjective for 'beautiful' in French—triggered a blocking mechanism.

From outside China it is difficult to see or appreciate these restrictions on a medium that has become the urban citizen's everyday means of correspondence, information-retrieval 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 were given the mission of creating a local Chinese alternative to the global American-generated Second Life, and in 2007 HiPiHi was launched.<sup>15</sup>

It must be emphasized that 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 *spectaculaire intégré* or the 'integrated spectacular'.<sup>16</sup> The integrated spectacular combines, for instance, state and non-state censorship, which is no longer restricted to China or other states which previously were considered to be practising a 'concentrated spectacular' form of state power. Censorship, especially post-9/11, is now commonplace in the media of 'liberal democracies' formerly considered to be practising a 'diffuse spectacular' form of power.<sup>17</sup>

Not only the Chinese government, but also the British government fears the possibilities of untrammelled free expression offered by e-mail and Internet communications as demonstrated by the passing into law of the United Kingdom's 2000 interception of communications act [Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIP Act) and the Telecommunications (Lawful Business Practice), (Interception of Communications) Regulations linked to that act] obliging internet service providers to facilitate government "tapping" of their clients' Internet communications.<sup>18</sup>

Witness also the recent furore over the accusations surrounding censorship practices relating to Steve Jobs's iPad product.<sup>19</sup>

So how and on what basis can intellectuals intervene in this 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, this author proposes a transworld concertation of public intellectuals; for the problems of China are also the problems of Europe—all is a question of degree and of history.

For instance, in France too citizens suffer from abusive and excessive administrative detention—*garde à vue*—an entirely undemocratic mechanism for a country priding itself on its universal values. The situation of illegal immigrants is even worse, with a much contested 'administrative retention' being applied to them.<sup>20</sup> France has also recently instituted a panoply of measures that intrude on an individual's right to privacy in her or his own home.

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 recently by their fellow citizens in Northern Ireland—an oppression to which the Irish of the north had been subjected for four decades, and before that the southern Irish for centuries.

That Vaclav Havel, former activist in Czechoslovakia's Velvet revolution and later President of his country, and Desmond Tutu should call on the Chinese authorities to free Liu Xiaobo may legitimately be considered an act of solidarity with dissidents suffering a fate similar to one they had experienced themselves; that Mrs Hilary Clinton, US Secretary of State, should use the announcement of the prize as an opportunity to 'urge China to uphold its international human rights obligations and to respect the fundamental freedoms and human rights of all Chinese citizens', while remaining silent over the United States' own grave current human rights abuses, particularly in the Guantanamo Bay camp, is unacceptable.<sup>21</sup>

As for European nations, given their history, and not only their overseas colonial history, they have few lessons to give in the domain of human rights, and even less moral authority to give them. Let us cite the role in the Rwandan genocide of the government of France, which, 'uniquely in Europe, prides itself on having a global humanitarian mission', and yet was proven to be 'implicated in genocide through its military support until 1994 for the extremist regime in Rwanda'.<sup>22</sup> Witness the recent refusal of French President Nicolas Sarkozy to apologize for the complicity of the French in the genocide:

During his whistle-stop visit to Rwanda, Nicolas Sarkozy made no apology for the role of France in the genocide of 1994. A carefully worded acknowledgement that mistakes had been made, not just by France, was as far as he went. The lack of apology was no surprise. No matter the weight of evidence that has accumulated, no forgiveness is being sought—and none will be offered. The issue is simply off the agenda.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, how could Sarkozy apologize? To do so would have also obliged the French state to admit France's 'guilt' in the war in Algeria, and beyond that to acknowledge responsibility for French colonialist wrongs in Africa— wrongs that the francophone poet and politician Aimé Césaire once likened to the crimes committed by the Nazis:

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

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

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

The fact is that so-called 'European' civilisation, 'western' civilisation 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 itself; 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>24</sup>

A further case of the French government's abandonment of its stated humanitarian vision was the recent expulsion of Roma Romanian or Bulgarian citizens, who are, consequentially, also citizens of the European Union, from French national territory in contravention of European laws and of basic principles of human rights.<sup>25</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 and the institutional historical amnesia that allows twenty-first-century governments to 'forget' the sordid practices of European powers on 'foreign' soil. A recent declaration by a well-known 'new left' Chinese public intellectual, Wang Hui, illustrates the point I wish to make:

One reason the Chinese people, in particular students, felt indirectly threatened [by Western media hostility during the 2008 Olympics] is that the Western media's knowledge of China is very limited. Yet, all of a sudden, China has become a big player on the global scene. It seems that nobody, including the Chinese people themselves, were prepared for this. The Western media must write and report more broadly and fairly, with more perspective, on what is going on in China. The Chinese side is also at fault. We need to be more open and transparent and encourage people to communicate and express themselves.<sup>26</sup>

The recent 2009 execution of a British citizen, Akmal Shaik—for alleged heroin-smuggling—was an execution which greatly distressed this author. But the reaction and determination of the Chinese authorities, and the ineptitude of the British authorities' responses, needs also to be seen in a historical

perspective: that of a society that suffered enormously from the imposition of mass opium addiction on Chinese people by the British authorities in the nineteenth century.

This is a historical narrative known to any Chinese school-child and it is anchored in the popular imaginary as a result of countless films and TV series that have endlessly recounted this story. But how many British people are aware of this history now, of the part played by British soldiers, officials and entrepreneurs in this history? For the British, the Chinese have always been associated with drug-taking; after all, the Chinese were the great opium addicts, were they not?

While in Hong Kong in early 2010, the author tested his reading of the Chinese reaction to Britain's outrage concerning the Akmal Shaik affair. He had a conversation with the dissident poet Bei Dao, who after 20 years of exile has only recently, in August 2011, been allowed to briefly visit Beijing. No friend of China's authorities, he agreed that ordinary Chinese did not appreciate the UK's position in this affair and that to talk about a British person selling drugs in China without recognizing the massive damage done to China, its people, its economy, and 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 and ignorance on the part of its civil society.

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* equals 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 a half.

What is perhaps unexpected is the bifurcation of that representation of opium use in England on the one hand and in the colonies on the other, especially in 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 Southeast 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 tempering their own great national moral righteousness, but what is being suggested here 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 apologies would need to be made in that process.

One of the great injustices of recent globalization, of India's and China's twenty-first-century economic emergence, is that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-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 attempting to arrive at a globally accepted 'truth' and disseminating it in school textbooks, instead of national(ist) imaginary building.

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—the story of Chinese exclusion.

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.<sup>27</sup>

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 Exclusion Act of 1882.

Furthermore, so as to protect Americans and Americanness 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 extra-territoriality 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**

The colonizer in the early twenty-first century is no longer only European, or 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 still 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, of so-called national, or ethnic, 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. The Indonesian military used starvation to exterminate the East Timorese and brought about the deaths of up to 180,000. Indonesia punished very few of its soldiers for the murder, assault and rape of the East Timorese that occurred during the 24 years of its occupation from 1974 to 1999. Indonesian police or soldiers were responsible for 70 per cent of the 18,600 unlawful killings or disappearances between 1975 and 1999. Napalm and chemical weapons were also used by Indonesian forces against the East Timorese during their invasion and annexation of East Timor.<sup>28</sup>

Until the middle of the twentieth century Tibet fell under British imperial dominance and 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? Has European thought, so well learnt by China's new masters, ever truly renounced the act and policy of colonization? When European powers 'decolonized' their colonies did they do it willingly, or were they simply forced to do so? As we mentioned earlier, President Sarkozy on a visit to Rwanda refused to apologize for France's role 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 role 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 first look to themselves and their own colonial history for the explanations, should they not?

The role of America, as the world's policeman and saviour since the Second World War, constitutes another major issue. That America is far from

putting in question its strategy as principal interventionist arbiter and administrator of the world order has been illustrated by events in Haiti, and recently in Chile. Watching the events evolve on BBC World and Sky News, the author was not surprised to see that the first headline on the 6 pm and 7 pm news was not the fact of an earthquake itself but the 'news' that the White House had said it was standing by to offer all necessary support. That two UK-based news channels should choose to prioritize America's role in Chile should come as no surprise after a decade of subservient disinformation, not to say propaganda, over events in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On 10 November 2010, David Cameron, UK Prime Minister, visited Beijing and gave a speech at Peking University. Here are extracts from what he said:

China has attempted to avoid entanglement in global affairs in the past. But China's size and global reach means that this is no longer a realistic choice. Whether it's climate change or development, health and education or global security, China is too big and too important now not to play its part. . .

But it's right also that Britain should be open with China on issues where, no doubt partly because of our different history and culture, we continue to take a different view. There is no secret that we disagree on some issues, especially around human rights. We don't raise these issues to make us look good, or to flaunt publicly that we have done so. We raise them because the British people expect us to, and because we have sincere and deeply held concerns. And I am pleased that we have agreed the next human rights dialogue between our two governments for January. Because in the end, being able to talk through these issues—however difficult—makes our relationship stronger.<sup>29</sup>

That all seems very diplomatic and reasonable. Cameron's speech constitutes an appeal for China's authorities to play a part in moving forward both agendas on the world economy and climate change, agendas nevertheless still largely set by the US and its allies, and it also hints at the question of human rights and Liu Xiaobo's continued incarceration.

But if we put the speech in its political and historical context, we find once again that there is an entrenched official British inability to account not for a 'different history and culture' but for China's and Britain's shared history, the history of Britain's nineteenth-century intervention in China that has been discussed above, and the continued Chinese perception of Britain as a nation engaging in 'gunboat diplomacy' around the world.

There was first the lack of credibility involved in the British Prime Minister raising the issue of human rights the day after it emerged that British soldiers might face trials for war crimes in Iraq and that servicemen had been referred to the Director of Service Prosecutions after an investigation raised the possibility of their having breached the International Criminal Court Act, which prohibits war crimes.<sup>30</sup> But more importantly there was the British refusal to comply with a simple Chinese request: that the British delegation refrain from wearing the red paper poppies which in the UK are worn in the weeks leading up to the commemoration of Armistice Day, 11 November. For in China the poppy represents not the red flower that flourished on the First World War battlefields, but the opium

poppy that symbolizes Britain's subjugation and humiliation of China during the Opium Wars and the subsequent ruination of the country. Instead, television viewers and newspaper readers were shown David Cameron and his ministers George Osborne, Vince Cable and Michael Gove sipping champagne and proudly wearing their poppies in front of a large canvas depicting the Great Wall.<sup>31</sup>

Whatever the analysis of the verbatim record of Cameron's discourse might lead the reader to believe, the context and the visual texts (Cameron sporting his poppy throughout his Beijing visit) provide a different and more complex reading of Cameron in China and his failure to make a gesture in the direction of a recognition of past, British, wrongs; and as mentioned above, the symbolism of the poppies would not have escaped the Peking University students who listened to the speech, as a British foreign correspondent pointed out:

Cameron's college audience in Beijing will know all this stuff [the history of the Opium Wars] just as British kids know about the wickedness of Hitler and the ambitions of Napoleon or Phillip II of Spain—all pluckily thwarted by you know who.<sup>32</sup>

By way of conclusion, there follows a rather shocking quotation, which nevertheless constitutes a still pertinent and legitimate analysis of European colonialism. The passage is from the late Aimé Césaire, writing in 1955 after having spent some time studying the history of Europe and Africa *in situ*, and still is unfortunately an apt summary of today's world:

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 diminished human rights, to have had and to still have a narrow and partial conception and ultimately sordidly racist conception of human rights.<sup>33</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 similar powers are emerging. If intellectuals are to intervene, their intervention needs to be transnational if it is to have a global impact. And any state or NGO international intervention needs to be historically informed, prefaced by recognition of historical responsibilities, and should also be performed in a spirit of humility.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Immanuel Wallerstein, *L'Universalisme européen, de la colonisation au droit d'ingérence*, Paris: Demopolis, 2008, *passim*.
- <sup>2</sup> Wallerstein, *L'Universalisme européen*; Jean Ziegler, *La Haine de l'Occident*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2008, p 33.
- <sup>3</sup> Ziegler, *La Haine de l'Occident*, pp 30–31.
- <sup>4</sup> See Harry Harootunian's essay 'Tracking the Dinosaur: Area Studies in the Time of Globalism', in his *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, pp 25–58.
- <sup>5</sup> See Thomas Boutonnet, 'Traitement moral de la question sociale dans la "société harmonieuse" de Hu Jintao', *Transtext(e)s Transcultures 跨文本跨文化* [online] 5, 2009, Document 4, <http://transtexts.revues.org/index271.html> (accessed 28 April 2010).
- <sup>6</sup> Michael F Martin, 'Prospects for Democracy in Hong Kong: The 2012 Election Reforms', Congressional Research Service Report for Congress R40992 (18 June 2010), [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40992.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40992.pdf) (accessed 20 September 2010).
- <sup>7</sup> Technically, *laogai* 劳改 is a punishment imposed after trial, while *laojiao* 劳教 is an administrative punishment imposed by the police. See Hualing Fu, 'Re-Education through Labour in Historical Perspective', *China Quarterly* 184, 2005, p 811.
- <sup>8</sup> V N Shaw, 'Corrections and Punishment in China', *Information and Analysis Source: Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 26(1), 2010, pp 53–71.
- <sup>9</sup> Cited in Bill Allan, 'Grim Legacy of "Laogai" Labour Camps', *HeraldScotland*, 13 December 2009, [www.heraldscotland.com/news/world-news/grim-legacy-of-laogai-labour-camps-1.991769](http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/world-news/grim-legacy-of-laogai-labour-camps-1.991769) (accessed 20 October 2010).
- <sup>10</sup> Perry Link, 'China's Charter 08', *New York Review of Books* 56(1), 15 January 2009, pp 54–56. Full text of Charter 08 available: [www.hrchina.org/public/contents/press?revision\\_id=89851&item\\_id=85717](http://www.hrchina.org/public/contents/press?revision_id=89851&item_id=85717) (accessed 20 October 2010).
- <sup>11</sup> Link, 'China's Charter 08'.
- <sup>12</sup> See Gregory B Lee, *China's Lost Decade*, 2nd edn, Lyon: Tigre de papier, 2011, p 337, for Liu Xiaobo's role in the events of 1989.
- <sup>13</sup> Gregory B Lee, *La Chine et le spectre de l'Occident: Contestation poétique, modernité et métissage*, Paris: Syllepse, 2002, p 197. See also Gregory B Lee, *Chinas Unlimited: Making the Imaginaries of China and Chineseness*, London: Routledge/Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2003, pp 57–60. For a comprehensive account of the development of the internet up to 2006 see Yongnian Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007.
- <sup>14</sup> Nils Hedberg, 'China: 40,000 Police Officers Monitor the Internet', Theme 2010: Internet Freedom, Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation, [www.hjalmarsonfoundation.se/group.asp?catID=1635](http://www.hjalmarsonfoundation.se/group.asp?catID=1635) (accessed 20 October 2010).
- <sup>15</sup> See HiPiHi—China's Pioneer of the 3D Virtual World Platform, [www.hipihi.com/en/](http://www.hipihi.com/en/) (accessed 20 October 2010).
- <sup>16</sup> Guy Debord, *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*, Paris: Gerard Lebovici, 1988, p 18.
- <sup>17</sup> Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle*, Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967; Gallimard, 1992; *Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit: Black and Red, 1983, *passim*.
- <sup>18</sup> Lee, *Chinas Unlimited*, p 59. And see Paula Cole, 'A Call for Clarity', *Legal Week*, 17 April 2003, [www.lexisnexis.com](http://www.lexisnexis.com) (accessed 19 October 2010).  
Under the 2000 Act and regulations 'monitoring or recording any communication without the individual's consent is permissible in circumstances necessary and relevant to the employer's business. This would seem to conflict with the protection afforded by Human Rights legislation. Article 8 confers the "right to respect" for an individual's "private and family life, his home and correspondence"—contrary to popular belief, it does not articulate a right to privacy as such. In addition Article 8, like other rights within the Human Rights Act, is not an absolute right—it is qualified in a number of ways. It says that interference with an individual's "right to respect" can be justified in some circumstances, for example the interests of national security, public safety or "the protection of rights and freedom of others".'
- <sup>19</sup> See for instance Anna Leach, 'Apple's No-Nipples Policy Means Fashion Mags Are Censoring Their iPad Editions', *Shiny Shiny*, 10 May 2010, [www.shinyshiny.tv/2010/05/apples\\_itunes\\_censors\\_fashion\\_magazines.html](http://www.shinyshiny.tv/2010/05/apples_itunes_censors_fashion_magazines.html) (accessed 12 October 2010); Charles Arthur, 'I Want the iPad Porn-Free, Says Apple's

- Steve Jobs: Apps for the New iPad Have Had to Self-Censor', *Guardian.co.uk*, 25 May 2010, [www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/may/25/ipad-porn-free-steve-jobs](http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/may/25/ipad-porn-free-steve-jobs) (accessed 12 October 2010).
- <sup>20</sup> Clémence Richard and Nicolas Fischer, 'A Legal Disgrace? The Retention of Deported Migrants in Contemporary France', *Social Science Information* 47(4), 2008, pp 581–603.
- <sup>21</sup> Vaclav Havel and Desmond Tutu, 'If China Frees Nobel Winner, It Will Show Its Strength', *The Washington Post*, 22 October 2010, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-yn/content/article/2010/10/21/AR2010102105090.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-yn/content/article/2010/10/21/AR2010102105090.html) (accessed 23 October 2010); Hilary Rodham Clinton, 'Remarks by Secretary Clinton: October 2010: Nobel Peace Prize Awarded to Liu Xiaobo', US State Department, 8 October 2010, [www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/10/149235.htm](http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/10/149235.htm) (accessed 23 October 2010).
- <sup>22</sup> Mel McNulty, 'French Arms, War and Genocide in Rwanda', *Crime, Law and Social Change* 33(1–2), 2000, p 105.
- <sup>23</sup> Linda Melvern, 'Sarkozy Closes the Book on Rwanda', *Guardian.co.uk*, 25 February 2010, [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/feb/25/rwanda-sarkozy-visit](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/feb/25/rwanda-sarkozy-visit) (accessed 20 October 2010).
- <sup>24</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1955, p 7.
- <sup>25</sup> Kristi Severance, 'France's Expulsion of Roma Migrants: A Test Case for Europe', *Global Research*, 22 October 2010, [www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=21558](http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=21558) (accessed 28 October 2010).
- <sup>26</sup> Wang Hui, 'Modern China Emerged before Its Encounter with the West', *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25(4), 2008, p 15.
- <sup>27</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Amérique*, Paris: Grasset, 1986, p 76
- <sup>28</sup> *Chega! Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor (CAVR—A Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação)*, October 2005, [www.cavr-timorleste.org/en/index.htm](http://www.cavr-timorleste.org/en/index.htm) (accessed 19 October 2010).
- <sup>29</sup> 'British PM David Cameron Speaks at PKU', Peking University, 10 November 2010, [http://english.pku.edu.cn/News\\_Events/News/Global/7328.htm](http://english.pku.edu.cn/News_Events/News/Global/7328.htm) (accessed 11 November 2010).
- <sup>30</sup> Tania Branigan, 'Cameron in China: What Does Beijing Think of Us? Let's Start with Hypocrisy—Alleged British War Crimes in Iraq and George Bush's Comments on Waterboarding Have Weakened David Cameron's Hand', *The Guardian*, 10 November 2010, [www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/nov/10/cameron-china-beijing-hypocrisy](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/nov/10/cameron-china-beijing-hypocrisy) (accessed 11 November 2010).
- <sup>31</sup> See photograph by Stefan Rousseau (Press Association), and article by Michael White: 'David Cameron should not have worn that poppy in China—Chinese officials apparently asked the UK delegation not to wear Remembrance Day poppies because they were a symbol of China's humiliation at the hands of Europe in the opium wars. To comply would have been good manners.' *The Guardian*, 10 November 2010, [www.guardian.co.uk/politics/blog/2010/nov/10/david-cameron-popy-china-michael-white](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/blog/2010/nov/10/david-cameron-popy-china-michael-white) (accessed 11 November).
- <sup>32</sup> White, 'David Cameron'.
- <sup>33</sup> Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, pp 12–13.