

China, like the rest of us, fights racism's demons. (1989, January 04). *The Ottawa citizen*.

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COLUMNS

China, like the rest of us, fights racism's demons

Why are some Chinese police and students attacking, even torturing, black African students in Nanjing? Because the Chinese are part of the human race — that fragile, frightened, insecure species whose deepest hopes and fears are everywhere the same.

Reports these past days of Chinese mobs chanting "black devils" at young foreign visitors shock us for many reasons: China is one of the world's oldest and most evolved civilizations; it's a fellow member of the Third World with the African nations; and — well, aren't only white people supposed to be racist?

None of these reasons holds water, for racism lurks in the guts of all human beings. The issue is not that only we rotten whites (or pinks, as Peter Ustinov called some of us) are mean to other peoples. It is this: what does a given nation do to combat the inborn propensity of all peoples to fear, distrust, hate and diminish other tribes?

Let's summarize what's happening in China, take a Cook's tour of intolerance in the world, then ask, at the end, if we can honestly name a society that is not fundamentally racist.

The Chinese-African tragedy lies, like most outbreaks of racism, in ignorance and insecurity. For thousands of years, China lived apart from "foreign devils" as the Middle Empire, as a civilization thinking itself the centre, and the summit, of the world.

Vital contacts with foreigners in the past five centuries — all in China itself — have done little to make Chinese feel warmer toward outsiders. From Marco Polo to the missionaries, most came either to borrow, to steal, to invade, corrupt or convert.

The mid-19th-century opium wars, imposed "unequal treaties," and extraterritorial European concessions were routine expressions of foreign contempt for this great, but militarily feeble, civilization.

The Russian Marxists were no more noble. When Kremlin Comintern agents came to Shanghai allegedly to help the young Chinese Communist party defeat the Kuomintang, their aims were at least as much rooted in Russian imperialism as in dreams of world revolution.

And when Mao dared distance himself from Moscow in the 1950s, Khrushchev tried to starve him out by brutally cutting off all Soviet aid to the young Communist state.

All of this added to Chinese ignorance of the outside world a still-deeper distrust of foreigners.

When China opened her universities to newly liberated black Africa in the early 1960s, there were soon echoes of Chinese-African tension. Part was due to sharing scarce university spaces; part to normal misunderstanding between new friends; part, as with Russia and some other Communist nations, to predictable rivalry over local women.



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What about racism elsewhere in the world? Here's a quick short list:

- Indonesian and Malaysian persecution of Chinese;
- Indian nastiness to the Sikhs;
- Sinhalese oppression of Tamils;
- Ugandan, Tanzanian and Kenyan persecution of East Indians (1970-75);
- Last year's massacres between Tutsi and Hutu tribesmen in Burundi;
- Bangladesh's slaughter of Chittagong hill tribes by Bengalis;
- Brazilian, Chilean and Argentinian murder and mistreatment of native Indians;
- Nicaraguan brutalization of Miskito Indians;
- Bulgaria's incredible 1987 campaign to measure the skulls of local Turks as a test of Bulgarian nationality;
- Azerbaijani attacks on Soviet Armenians; ● Rumanian mistreatment of local Hungarians;
- Israeli brutality to Palestinians — and (in the past?) Palestinian brutality to Israelis.

The full list is 100 times longer. For racism defined as contempt for, and discrimination against, other peoples is a universal sickness. Some of it just hides better behind trendy, self-serving hypocrisies.

The issue, again, is only: what do civilized governments do to contain the microbes?

A horrified China, to its honor, has officially denounced Nanjing's outbreaks of racism. To counter the damage of recent days, it may have to do much more.

Maybe even as much as Canada? We still owe reparation to our elderly Chinese Canadians for earlier racism, as we promise now to Japanese Canadians. And we owe incomparably more to our native peoples.

But what country does as much through law, policy and official example to banish racism? What other country welcomes immigrants and refugees as open-heartedly as we do, even giving them money and microphones to tell us within weeks (as sometimes happens) how racist we are?

Canadians have no cause to be smug. But neither need we wallow in guilt. Like the Chinese and everybody else in our insecure human species, we simply have to face our inborn vice, then try with some humility to overcome it.