

TOWARD THE REPUBLIC: A NOT-SO DISTANT MIRROR

BY CHEN POKONG

A historical television drama took China by storm earlier this year before it fell to apparent censorship. Chen Pokong examines the modern resonances that give the series an unprecedented relevance for Chinese viewers.*

The mainland television serial “Toward the Republic” has become a cause celebre inside and outside of China. Presented in April this year during the “prime time” evening hour usually reserved for Party propaganda, the series benefited additionally from its broadcast during a period when many Chinese confined themselves to home during the SARS crisis.

Originally produced in one-hour segments, this joint production between CCTV and a Hunan production company became increasingly truncated, to the point where the last episode lasted only 15 minutes. It is believed that the Beijing authorities, once aware of the program’s content, began wielding the heavy knife of censorship. However, uncut video versions continue to circulate to great demand on the black market in China, as well as in the Chinese communities of the free world.

The program has aroused considerable debate among those inside and outside of China who have seen it. One point of universal agreement is the high quality of the production, including an unusual degree of artistic integrity, historical verisimilitude and entertainment value. On a deeper level, however, two highly divergent views have arisen regarding the program. The first is that “Toward the Republic” is an exercise in apologetics for the current regime. Focusing on the tumultuous years immediately before and after Sun Yatsen established the Republic of China, the series reassesses the reputations of controversial historical figures such as the Qing Empress Dowager Cixi, Li Hongzhang and Yuan Shikai in a somewhat more sympathetic light. The diplomatic “sell-off” of Chinese territory to foreign powers by Li Hongzhang, in particular, seems to justify similar agreements signed more recently by Jiang Zemin. In addition, the stress on the need for stability in the early years of the Republic echoes modern calls for the same.

On the other hand, some viewers see a more “subversive” intent in the series’ vivid and admiring portrayal of figures

such as Sun Yatsen, who not so long ago staged a revolution to overthrow a dictatorship and establish a democratic, free and constitutional government in China.

In fact, this 59-episode series manages to portray all of the significant political actors of that period, and offers a daring reappraisal of relatively recent historical figures and events. But while familiar characters such as Cixi, Li Hongzhang, Yuan Shikai and Sun Yatsen are cast in a new light, in the opinion of this writer these fresh portrayals do not always constitute a positive reassessment, nor can they always be considered a rationalization of the actions of comparable contemporary political figures.

A few scenes from the series illustrate this view:

Scene 1: Dinner time at the palace of the Qing Dynasty in Beijing: The Empress Dowager casts her eyes over an array of more than 100 costly dishes and sighs, “So little to eat! It’s hardly worth raising my chopsticks!”

The scene changes to the Imperial Palace in Japan, where the Emperor announces that he will invest his private fortune in building up Japan’s military strength. “Starting from today, I will eat only one meal a day,” the Emperor says.

Scene 2: The Japanese navy has won an overwhelming victory in a battle against the Chinese fleet in 1894, in spite of being greatly outnumbered. The Japanese Emperor, with his back to the audience, is told the news. In response he says, “I’m hungry.” His attendants immediately shout, “Bring food for the Emperor!” But the Emperor stops them with a motion of his hand. He turns to the audience and draws from his robe a small paper package, from which he unwraps a crust of bread. As he bites into the crust, the Emperor smiles, and a tear rolls down his cheek.

The scene changes to the Imperial Palace in Beijing, where Cixi has just been told of China’s humiliating defeat. She looks dully at the mounds of delicacies piled before her, unable to eat. Her son and attendants implore her to take nourishment for the sake of her health, to no avail.

For many viewers, the implication of these scenes is clear. But to this writer the real value of these scenes is the objective manner in which the situations are portrayed, allowing the viewer to use his own judgments and draw his own conclusions. The message is that reality is complicated —

heroes and villains don't go around with the appropriate labels stamped on their foreheads. The quality of the character is not revealed in his physiognomy, but in his actions.

To anyone familiar with Chinese history, this series recalls to mind the amazing similarities between the late Qing period and the present day, separated by nearly a century. Some examples include the following:

- The Qing Dynasty's Westernization movement is reminiscent of the open reform policies of the current regime.
- The Qing insistence on adhering to the principles of the ancestors is echoed in the recent exhortations to maintain the "four basic principles" and emphasis on stability above all.
- Both the late Qing and the current rulers emphasize the need to strengthen China's military.
- The late Qing used Western methods in dealing with the West, while China's modern government has introduced "Socialism with Chinese characteristics."
- The late Qing strove for peaceful relations with other countries, and signed international treaties ceding territories such as Taiwan and Hong Kong. The current government has likewise employed the tactic of "Hide your weapons and show a peaceful face," and has yielded to foreign interests on territories bordering Russia, the Diaoyutai islands and other areas.
- The Qing government promoted Shanghai as China's "window to the West," while the modern regime created Shenzhen.
- The late Qing government claimed unprecedented reforms, just as the current regime does.
- The failed 1989 democracy movement is reminiscent of the 1898 Reform Movement, in which a group of intellectuals petitioned the government with similar undesirable consequences.
- Both the Qing dynasty and the Communist regime started out with a clean and heroic image, only to decay into self-interest and corruption.

Another important point is that the Manchu Qing rulers were an occupying force from outside China, while the current ruling ideology, Communism, was imported from Germany and Russia. When Mao was on his deathbed he said he would soon be seeing Marx, not Confucius. It is also worth noting that "Toward the Republic" makes no reference to "China," but only to the "Qing Dynasty," indicating the fine distinctions that the writers employ in this series.

In a broader sense, the parallels between the late Qing and present China are so striking that the modern Chinese viewer of "Toward the Republic," whether he's a member of the ruling regime, a struggling oppositionist, an insider or an outsider, or even an ordinary unengaged citizen, cannot help but feel that he is observing himself in a prior existence.

In a similar way, "Toward the Republic" presents history as a series of cautionary allegories for modern China.

Particularly instructive are the conflicts and comparisons between China and Japan one hundred years ago (and in many cases echoed today). In the late Qing period, China held the status of Asia's premier naval power and was ranked fourth in

the world. In spite of this, the Imperial Navy suffered crushing defeat at the hands of the vastly inferior Japanese Navy. Of what use was China's superior "hardware" when its "software" – its human factor – remained weak? Is not the Qing Imperial military's involvement in smuggling and bogus displays highly reminiscent of the present-day People's Liberation Army? The lesson from history is clear: prosperity and strength are not everything, and prosperity and strength will not necessarily save China. China enjoyed three flourishing periods – in the Han, Tang and early Qing dynasties – but they were transient. Today's prosperity is not China's first, nor will it be the last.

This is a point not adequately understood by scholars who have returned to contribute toward China's progress after receiving a Western education abroad – whether in the present day or 100 years ago. Instead of promoting reform after their return, such scholars as Yang Du took a more reactionary turn in the early years of the Republic and convinced Yuan Shikai to restore the monarchy on the basis that it was more suited to the "Chinese character."

In a similar manner, the "father of the Chinese space program," Tsien Hsue-shen, returned to China in 1955 with the knowledge he gained abroad, and in the name of patriotism assisted the new dictatorship in asserting the "truth" of the claim that revolutionary farming methods could grow "one thousand catties of grain on one mu." No doubt the intentions of scholars such as Tsien Hsue-shen were all the best, but once they sank into the morass of totalitarian society they lost all control. One can only wonder how many of those murdered in the Cultural Revolution or at Tiananmen Square fell to weapons developed with the help of Tsien Hsue-shen. Other scholars, such as Li Zhengdao and Yang Zhenyu, have followed in Tsien's footsteps in lending their expertise and reputations to the glory of the Communist dictatorship.

Most disturbing is the large number of modern-day Tsien Hsue-shens, who after receiving their education in free societies such as the U.S. and Canada, return to China and employ their new technical knowledge to assist the government in blocking the Internet and monitoring private e-mail.

At present there is a trend among intellectuals in China to observe that if Sun Yatsen had not carried out his revolution, the late Qing rulers might have through their existing Westernization program naturally developed a democratic system without the chaos and bloodshed brought by revolution. At the same time, they imply that under the rule of the Communist Party, economic prosperity will eventually lead to democratization. Both notions unfairly place the blame on revolutionaries rather than on the existing political power, where it belongs. If the authorities fail to initiate or hasten reforms, revolution is inevitable, and the price for this is paid not only by the overthrown regime, but also by society as a whole.

It is worth noting that modern Chinese history textbooks present the diplomatic memoranda of Western countries in a hostile, coercive, even extortionate light. But in "Toward the Republic," the depiction of the context of these memoranda suggests a different conclusion: that many of the demands made by foreign governments were actually in China's best interests.

One example is the rise of the Boxer movement, which advocated a Taliban-like prohibition against all things classified as Western. The Boxers not only attacked foreign ambassadors and killed missionaries, but also destroyed “Western products” such as railroads and electrical transmission lines. Extremists could even rationalize killing a fellow Chinese who dared to carry a pencil.

Chinese history textbooks depict eight “hegemonic Western nations” ganging up on China with diplomatic memoranda calling on the government to put an end to the Boxer movement and its attacks on both foreigners and Chinese. The Qing government strongly resisted this outside interference, believing it could use the Boxers to bolster its own power base against the West. As a result, the eight Western countries joined together in an armed attack against China in 1900, soundly defeating the Chinese army and the Boxers and pillaging the Imperial Palace.

The eight Western nations insisted on punishing the Boxers’ conservative defenders by calling for the execution of 175 Qing officials, including the Empress Dowager, who fled to Xi’an and begged for mercy. Following negotiations by Li Hongzhang, the Qing government agreed to depose the Empress, and the other senior officials were executed or committed suicide. A government crackdown also eliminated the remnants of the Boxers, now that it was clear they could serve no useful purpose. From an objective viewpoint, this eradication of the corrupt and moribund Qing dynasty was good for China, and if only Cixi had been executed along with her officials, Chinese history might have taken a more beneficial turn.

Another example of “hegemonic Western interference” was the diplomatic memoranda opposing Yuan Shikai’s restoration of the monarchy and refusing to recognize the new government under Cixi. The memoranda clearly implied support for the reformist faction headed by the deposed emperor Kuang Hsu and opposition to Cixi’s conservative rule. Opposition to Yuan’s “constitutional monarchy” was in effect opposition to China’s move backward, and support for China’s progress toward a more enlightened government.

What was the motivation for these diplomatic memoranda? Was it a fear of China becoming too great and powerful? Was it a desire to plunge China into chaos and backwardness? What if it was just the opposite: that Western countries over and over again sent the message that they wanted to see a China that was stable and progressive and participating in the most enlightened international trends? A hundred years later we still see the Chinese government criticizing the West for its “interference” under remarkably similar circumstances.

If China had at the outset taken a less reactionary view, it might have enjoyed much smoother progress. We can see that Japan eventually rose to become an economic and political power rivaling the West as a result of its accepting with greater humility the warnings and advice of the West. In the meantime, how many decades of progress have the Chinese people lost through failed experiments such as the 1898 Reform Movement, the 1911 Revolution and the April 5th Movement?

If history could be revised, it would be tempting to envision the China that might have developed if the late Qing dynasty

had succeeded in implementing its constitutional reforms; if Yuan Shikai had not restored the monarchy; if Sun Yatsen had managed to consolidate the strength of the Republic before he died; if there had been a different outcome to China’s civil war. But as it turned out, China was plunged into decades of senseless violence and deceit under the Chinese Communist Party. Asia’s first democratic republic declined into one of Asia’s last remaining dictatorships. The current regime holds high the portrait of Sun Yatsen while raping his ideals. The only consolation is that Sun Yatsen himself cannot experience the heartbreak of seeing this fruit of 5,000 years of glorious civilization.

“Toward the Republic” is informed by the deep desire for true democracy and a true republic. At the same time, it reminds Chinese people of the importance of patience and understanding as a country experiences “chaos” and other difficulties in its transition to democracy. Regardless of the cost, democracy is the natural direction for mankind, and the only kind of government that can give us a China that is truly prosperous, stable, just and clean. In this respect “Toward the Republic” serves as an essential textbook for China’s progress toward a free and democratic system.

Of course the series is not without its flaws, the greatest of which is its depiction of the historical figure Yang Du. This political chameleon is molded into a moral knight who holds high the torch of righteousness. His mercurial opportunism is transformed into unyielding adherence to principle. Originally a Qing Dynasty official, Yang supported reforms under Kuang Hsu upon returning to China from his studies abroad, then backed the constitutional monarchy under Yuan Shikai, and in his old age became a member of the Communist Party through the sponsorship of Zhou Enlai. This is the man whom Yuan Shikai decried on his deathbed with the words, “Yang Du, how you have misled me!”

People like Yang Du embody the type of Chinese who in the name of patriotism submit themselves to a slavery more debased than that required by any emperor. They substitute devotion to a tyrant for devotion to the welfare of their people and their country. Patriotism – love of country – is a natural condition. But the patriotism of the slave is in vain, because he is not empowered to be a true citizen of his own country. The fate of the Boxers illustrates the tragedy of those who blindly and vainly espouse patriotism, as opposed to those like Yang Du who cynically exploit it to their own ends. Perhaps Yang Du’s favorable portrayal in the series is due to the fact that he was a native of Hunan, like many of the people involved in this production; and perhaps due to the fact that he was a member of the Party.

In spite of its shortcomings, “Toward the Republic” constitutes an important milestone in Chinese television. Every Chinese should make a point of watching this series to compare, to reflect, to awaken.

Translated by Chen Pokong and Stacy Mosher

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