Banyan | Mirror, mirror on the wall

As China pushes out into the world, its racism at home becomes more glaring

THE annual "Spring Festival Gala", broadcast on the eve of the lunar new year, is the most-watched television programme on Earth. It is also one of the most vetted by the authorities, for it is intended not merely to entertain its 800m-odd Chinese viewers. Less-than-subliminal messaging is designed to showcase how contented all Chinese are under a wise Communist leadership—and, in recent years, how gratefully the world welcomes China's benign activities in it. So what could one make of an excruciatingly crass sketch in this year's show that put racist stereotypes of Africans at the heart of the supposed jollity?

The skit's topic was, for sure, a sketch-writer's nightmare: celebration of a Chinese-built fast train in Kenya. And if the savannah backdrop and tribal dances with which the scene opened were the stuff of cliché, at least real Africans were used in the making of it. But then a Chinese actress appeared in blackface and African dress, with exaggerated fake buttocks and a bowl of fruit on her head. For no clear reason she had in tow a blackfaced Chinese man dressed as a monkey. The humorous highlight was meant to be when this woman's daughter missed the prospect of a date with the show's handsome Chinese host thanks to the unexpected arrival of his (Chinese) bride. Far from being upset for her daughter, the mother didn't mind because, she exclaimed, "I love the Chinese people! I love China!" The audience were delighted.

Chinese officials often try to portray racism as primarily a Western problem. Yet there is a widespread tendency in China to look down on other races, especially black people. Two years ago a television ad for a laundry detergent showed a young Chinese woman luring a black man closer, triumphantly popping a detergent capsule into his mouth and stuffing him into a washing machine. At the end of the cycle, out came a fresh-faced Chinese man, over whom the woman swooned. Among the tens of thousands of Africans living in a neighbourhood of Guangzhou known as "Chocolate City", many report racist slights.

The outraged response of many netizens in China to the African skit suggests a growing awareness at home that bigotry is a Chinese problem, too. It may be one that time will help alleviate. After all, America went from bans on inter-racial marriage to electing a black president in a mere four decades. And even those Chinese who acknowledge that China has a problem rightly observe that it is far from the worst offender. Myanmar burns Rohingya villages, Islamic State tried to wipe out the Yazidis, and Sudan until recently enslaved black Africans. Racism in China, by contrast, is seldom expressed violently.

But a problem it is, and one that is aggravated by the authorities' efforts to suppress discussion of it (censors raced online to delete criticism of the TV sketch). The Communist Party fears that such debate may undermine its efforts to portray Chinese people as victims of Western racism during the 19th and early 20th centuries—a narrative of humiliation which the party regards as a crucial explanation of why it has the right to rule.

It does not help that long after scientific notions of race were demolished in the West, and social or behavioural classifications of race shown to be imagined constructs, race remains an accepted form of discourse in China—even in academic circles. Frank Dikötter of the University of Hong Kong argues that contemporary notions of race in China began to develop at the end of the 19th century among modernisers, who were inspired by Western intellectual fads such as social Darwinism. As the last imperial dynasty, the Qing, crumbled, the search was on to find a unifier for a sprawling empire, culturally and linguistically diverse, that encompassed Manchu rulers, Tibetan herders, Turkic caravan-drivers, Hunanese peasants, Shanghainese entrepreneurs and colonial subjects in Hong Kong. Neither religion nor language (no standard Chinese existed then) would serve.

Race, then, became the tool to forge an accidental nation out of empire—a project that absorbed Chinese nationalists for much of the 20th century. After the death of Mao Zedong, when academic life began to recover at universities, anthropology was rehabilitated. Its practitioners threw themselves into an orgy of cranial, serological and other tests—supposedly to prove that Tibetans, Uighurs and other officially defined "minority" peoples in China's borderlands were closely related to a "Han" Chinese majority, and that all shared a common origin. The mythical Yellow Emperor enjoys an approved cult status in China as the progenitor of the Chinese race. Chinese academics remain curiously resistant to an "out of Africa" explanation of human origins.

An all-embracing device

This, says Mr Dikötter, is race put to an inclusionary use: preserving what in effect were China's imperial borders. Of course, some groups are more equal than others. China's 55 officially designated minorities are today still depicted in the state's propaganda in terms remarkably like black people in the minstrel shows that were once popular in the West. They are cheerful, colourfully attired and prone to break into dance or song. Not usually harmful, they are nevertheless in need of raising to a less childlike plane of evolutionary development, the state suggests.

The same applies to Africans, and even other groups along China's expanding "belt-and-road" network of investment in other countries' infrastructure. It was Mao in the 1950s who first promoted the mantle of Chinese leadership in Africa—under the guise of class solidarity, but in reality with a whiff of racial tutelage. Today, the paternalism struggles to disguise itself, as in the recent variety show. But when the authorities signally fail to acknowledge China's home-grown racism, they should not be surprised if their civilising mission goes underappreciated, either from ungrateful minorities in Xinjiang or Tibet, or from those who, in countries that face waves of state-led commercial involvement, complain of Chinese neocolonialism abroad. ■