

STEPHAN RICHTER

The US Civil War continues

A big hoax of American history is that the Civil War ended in 1865. It has not ended yet. What was achieved then was more of an armistice.

As the current logjam in United States Congress makes plain, the Civil War is still going on in today's America — and with virulence that most other civilized nations find as breathtaking as it is irresponsible.

Plenty of US commentators are trying to make light of the government shutdown. They argue that it is just a bunch of Tea Party Republicans who is causing the current mayhem. Such an interpretation underestimates the forces of history and the continuing deep divisions in American society.

The reason why the Civil War was declared to be over was the military defeat of the South. But can anyone seriously doubt that, culturally, the same anti-Union spirit is still heard in the halls of US Congress today?

The fight against "Obamacare" (President Barack Obama's healthcare law) is cast by Republicans as fighting the authoritarian — and, in the words of some conservative commentators, "fascist" — views of the Obama administration and the American "left". In their eyes, the Republicans are staking out the democratic and libertarian political high ground, all in the defense of "freedom".

The fight in Washington thus is not about any of the things in the headlines, the budget, debt or Obamacare. These are proxies in a fundamental battle over the structure of American society.

Democrats want that structure to create more economic opportunity for the underprivileged, so that the national economy can grow. To Republicans, any such investment is a net negative on what they see as

their core mission — defending the interests of rich and middle-class Americans.

Thus, we are largely dealing with a battle over redistributing shares of economic power in the clothing of cultural values. That is why it is being fought so bitterly.

The proper way to understand the underlying issue of the Civil War, slavery, as well as the healthcare law, is to see them as symbols of deeper conflicts.

The parallels in the legislative history bear that out. Slavery was formally abolished in the US in 1865 and, for a few years, there seemed to be a will to move the country forward. One step was setting up a bank that would grant loans to freed slaves, so that they could build a prosperous future for themselves and their families.

The so-called Freedman's Bureau met a fate similar to what today's Republicans have in mind for Obama's healthcare law.

The Freedman's Bureau lingered for a few years before it was allowed to fade away. The economic, social and cultural consequences of condemning freed slaves to a life of continued servitude, albeit of another kind, are well known. They are the main cause of the culture of dependence which sadly continues to this day — and which Republicans are quick to use as a justification not to do more for African Americans.

With their countless de-funding moves, the Republicans are now trying to keep nationwide access to healthcare from becoming a reality in the land. Amazing how history repeats itself.

Of course, there is one very important difference that should make today's Republicans squirm. In the Civil War, it was the Republicans, mostly found in the North at the time, who were the political force

aligned against slavery (then president Abraham Lincoln was a Republican — indeed he was a Republican for most of his political life). It was the Democrats in the South who fiercely resisted its abolition, as well as resisting the Civil Rights Act a century later.

The equivalent of politically and economically freeing the slaves back then is granting healthcare to all Americans today. The old order is about to be toppled and that leads Southerners and white conservatives everywhere to fear for the end of the United States, as they know it.

Now the South is once again rebelling against modernizing shifts of American society. In one of the greatest political realignments of modern politics, that region is the power base of Republicans.

Look at the list of state governors who refused to expand the medical program for low-income people (Medicaid) and compare that to the list of states that fought to preserve slavery. There is an amazing overlap.

Of the 11 states of the former Confederacy, only Arkansas has agreed to accept federal funds to expand Medicaid. Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia have all refused, or are leaning in that direction.

For America's future, it is vital for the still ongoing US civil war finally to come to a close. However, as current events in Washington demonstrate, the odds for that to happen do not look good.

The author is publisher and editor-in-chief of The Globalist, where this article originally appeared.
© The Globalist

HOT WORDS

Golden Week

黄金周 (huang jin zhou)

"Golden Week" refers to the two weeklong holidays, one during Spring Festival, the other for the National Day from Oct 1 to Oct 7. This year, the Golden Week has grabbed the headlines for all the wrong reasons, with many people recounting their frustrating travel experiences.

Although people returned to work this week, many of them are still talking about the massive traffic jams, "uncivilized" behaviors of fellow tourists, inflated prices, and the damage to scenic spots and the environment.

For example, on Oct 2, about 40,000 tourists flocked to Jiuzhaigou Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage site in Sichuan province. But because of overcrowding, more than 4,000 tourists couldn't enter the nature reserve for about 10 hours.

No wonder, some netizens have dubbed the "Golden Week" as the "Golden Mess". Others say that people should enjoy a "staycation" instead of a vacation during the seven days.

Official figures show that 428 million tourists traveled across China during the seven days, generating a revenue of 223.3 billion yuan (\$36.5 billion), which is welcome.

But the chaos created during the two "Golden Week" holidays has prompted some experts to suggest that the authorities stagger the mandated holidays. Others say the government would do well to restore the "Golden Week" May Day holiday to ease the pressure on infrastructure and tourist sites during the two existing "Golden Weeks".

XIAO LIXIN

Waiting for home bands to play the right tune

The hottest topic of discussion among students, according to Sina micro blog, is neither education nor future careers; it is Hallyu stars of the Republic of Korea. A quick glance at the micro blog, reveals how much Chinese teenagers adore ROK music groups.

Chinese teenagers' love for Hallyu stars may seem superficial to many. But there is a lesson here for the Chinese music industry. Hallyu, or the Korean wave, a term coined by Chinese journalists in the late 1990s, has been used by Asian people to describe the popularity of ROK pop music, TV dramas and films.

K-pop, the pioneering Korean wave, is extremely popular in East and Southeast Asian countries — it is catching on in other parts of the world as well. The mind-boggling popularity of "Gangnam style", a song by K-pop singer PSY — whose video had generated over 1 billion clicks on YouTube by the end of 2012 — is hard to explain. So what does K-pop owe its success to? The answer: reform and government support, and the ROK entertainment industry's well-organized "star-producing" system (though some have criticized it for its "slave contracts").

K-pop, however, still faces challenges. Perhaps free music download has hurt it the most. According to the ROK government's 2011 white paper on the music industry, the returns peaked at 410.4 billion won (\$37.5 million) in 2000 but dropped to 82.3 billion won in 2010. It has dropped further over the last two years, between 70 billion and 80 billion won.

The ROK realized early that the Korean wave was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to enhance the country's image and promote its soft power. Accordingly, it introduced a series of supportive policies at the beginning of this century to help its cultural industry. And the ROK Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism decided to invest 127.5 billion won as part of its medium-term plan (2009-13) to revive the domestic music industry and internationalize K-pop.

Entertainment companies in the ROK hold open auditions and use their scout network to recruit teenagers from all around the world. For example, Han Geng, a former member of Super Junior, joined the K-pop group through an open audition held in China, and Nichkhun, a Thai American, was recruited in Los Angeles. Apart from learning how to sing and dance as professionals, the trainees also receive coaching in acting and foreign languages, such as Japanese, Chinese and English, to meet the demand of the global market.

Normally, it takes three to five years for a teenager to hit the stage, but only one in every 10 trainees succeeds in becoming part of a group made up of other chosen trainees. Even established groups have a "shelf life" of about five years on average because newer, younger groups emerge to replace them or group members choose to go their different ways. The sharp competition forces K-pop bands to remain at their professional best or risk demise.

In comparison, many Chinese singers emerge from talent shows and attain stardom even before undergoing systematic, let alone comprehensive, training to meet the demands of the audience and the market. At best, their training lasts for a season. Worse, the short-term profit-driven entertainment agencies, with which the budding stars sign contracts, spend little or nothing on their professional training.

Chinese entertainment companies that want to widen their market have to find ways to extend the longevity of their singers, for which they could learn a thing or two from their neighbors to the east and use their experience to generate a Chinese musical "phenomenon".

The author is a writer with China Daily.
E-mail: xiaolixin@chinadaily.com.cn.

The opinions expressed on this page do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



PANG LI / CHINA DAILY

ZHANG ZHOUXIANG

Money for the bride a real burden

“How much does a wife cost in your province?” This seemingly ridiculous question was part of the greeting for many people during the just concluded “Golden Week” National Day holiday. Incidentally, the National Day holiday is the peak season for weddings in China.

According to Chinese tradition, a groom usually pays a certain amount of money to the bride's family to fix a marriage. The practice is prevalent throughout the country. A recent Beijing News survey shows that 89.1 percent of the newly married couples abided by the tradition.

In most cases, the amount men (or their families) have to pay the women's families is too big for most to afford. According to media reports and micro-bloggers, the “price” of marrying varies from 60,000 yuan (\$9,804) to 100,000 yuan in central and western regions; it could be more than 100,000 yuan in most coastal provinces. Compare this with the average annual salary of 46,769 yuan in public enterprises and 28,752 in private ones in China in 2012.

The endowment amount is even higher in certain developed regions. For example, in provinces like Guangdong, a would-be groom must gift a gold necklace, gold ring and gold bracelet apart from the endowment money to the would-be bride's family. In cities like Beijing and Shanghai, a man could also be expected to purchase an apartment before marriage,

and even a tiny apartment costs more than 1 million yuan. Add to that the price of a car in some cases.

In some parts of eastern Shandong province, the endowment money is measured by weight. For instance, to marry a woman, one must pay her parents at least 1.5 kilograms of 100 yuan notes, which would add up to at least 131,000 yuan, according to some bankers.

Endowment may be part of Chinese tradition, but the standards have become so high in recent years that a majority of families are finding it difficult to meet them. Besides, many newly married couples are forced to host extravagant wedding ceremonies to keep up with the Joneses and, in the process, run up huge debts that could turn their married life sour, at least in the initial phase.

Rapidly rising living cost is the primary cause of rising endowment amounts. For most young people, marriage means setting up home independent of their parents, which has become increasingly difficult given the constantly rising prices of almost everything. Complicating young couples' problems is the deeply rooted tradition that a family needs its own home, which is becoming a mission impossible for many because of skyrocketing housing prices. No wonder, most newly (or to be) married couples turn to their parents for help.

The Beijing News survey shows that 75.7 percent of newly married women's families give the endowment amount, adding some from their own savings

in many cases, to their daughters to help the new couple to fulfill their initial financial needs.

Many parents save every penny for their children's wedding, even though their own weddings were simple affairs with little involvement of money. And not surprisingly, their frugal wedding ceremonies didn't have any bearing on their married life.

In contrast, luxurious weddings are no insurance for a sound marriage. China's divorce rate has been rising for seven successive years. Worse, the percentage of divorced couples aged between 35 and 22 is increasing, and “lightning divorce”, that is, within one year of marriage, is no longer rare.

Given the rapid rate of urbanization, more young people born in rural areas or small cities are living and getting married in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, where wedding expenses have shot through the roof. The high endowment amounts often rob grooms' parents of their life's savings and causes family disputes. Just google “gift (endowment money)” and you will find all kinds of family disputes that it has caused.

When will the practice change? Nobody knows. Hopefully, with people's income rising and the gap between urban and rural areas narrowing, the burden will become bearable for more families.

The author is a writer with China Daily.
E-mail: zhangzhouxiang@chinadaily.com.cn.