

## Changing Views of the West's Impact on China

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Over the past two decades there have been great changes in the ways in which modern Chinese history is interpreted by western historians. This is especially true in regard to the western historians' interpretations of the impact that the west has had on the course of modern Chinese history, which has usually most concerned modern western historians.

In the past, western historians stressed this theme so much that indigenous developments in China were almost completely neglected. There have been many reasons for this pre-occupation with this aspect of modern Chinese history by western historians. Probably the most important reason has been the availability of western resource materials and the relative unavailability of Chinese source materials for western historians.

Today the importance of the Western impact on China is being steadily downgraded. The importance of indigenous developments is being increasingly appreciated. This paper will attempt to trace and evaluate this development.

### **The Enlightenment**

Western interest in Chinese history first began during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Interestingly, the philosophers of the Enlightenment were more interested in features of Chinese government that they thought could be beneficially adopted by

European governments.

The historians of the Enlightenment interpreted Chinese history more in the light of their own theories than in actual historical realities. At this time China had been ruled for 133 years by three Manchu emperors. This unique dynastic stability enabled the Manchu government to pursue policies with remarkable continuity. As a result, the Chinese during this period enjoyed a prolonged period of prosperity and peace.

Eighteenth century historians, especially Voltaire, believed that many features of Manchu rule manifested examples of the enlightened despotism which they believed to be the best possible government. They were much attracted by the role of Confucianism as an orthodox political ideology. The role of the literate in government and its recruitment through civil service examinations were recommended as models of European governments.

This extolment of Chinese government was to be short lived. What was to be passed on to future historians was the projections of the stability then being enjoyed back into the past. From this period dates the impression of the stability and unchanging nature of Chinese society that many western scholars have evinced.

### **The Nineteenth Century**

It has nearly become a truism that the historian views the past through the prism of the present. This observation is especially pertinent to the views held about China by western scholars of the nineteenth century.

The position of the West relative to that of China had been radically altered from the period of the eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century western influence on China was negligible. The material conditions of the two societies were roughly equivalent with that of China being richer and more complex in many regards.

The end of the eighteenth century produced the beginning of

the industrial revolution in Europe. From a position of rough parity, there developed an increasingly widening gap in the material conditions of the societies of Europe and China. Westreners began to identify China as a backward society.

At the same time, intellectual developments in Europe reinforced the impression of China as a backward society. Economists and governments in Europe adopted the principles of laissez-faire and free trade. An antipathy towards despotism became increasingly stronger. Westerners in general began to believe in the boons that were to be brought to humanity by progress. Progress was identified with sweeping changes in all aspects of life. China, with its trade restrictions, autocratic government, and seemingly stagnant society, was identified with barbarism. Contact with the dynamic civilization of the West would obviously lead to the energization and transformation of Chinese society. These views were to heavily influence Western historians of China up to the present day.

People writing about China in this period were usually amateurs with no formal training as historians of China. They tended to be missionaries, diplomats, and customs officials. They were usually incapable of using Chinese source materials. It was only in this type of environment that a scholar such as Edmund Backhouse could flourish.

Backhouse was a reclusive scholar living in Peking and earning a livelihood as a translator. He claimed to have received some honors from the imperial court for his services. He coauthored a series of books about current political events with the respected journalist I. O. Bland, with Backhouse providing translations of source materials that he claimed to have come from the houses of important court officials which had been tooted during the Boxer Rebellion. These and many other documents were donated by Backhouse to Oxford.

It was not until many years later that this material began to be assorted by a native Chinese scholar. To his surprise, many of

the documents were crude forgeries. After even many more years, a memoir written by Backhouse in his last years as a patient in a hospital came to light. Most of the memoir was taken up by descriptions of vast debaucheries that Backhouse claimed to have participated in. He was pictured as a favorite of the empress dowager and to have experienced a large number of homosexual acts with many important court officials.

Although many of the documents donated by him were probably authentic, the combination with forged documents and their association with the mentally diseased Backhouse taints the reliability of all the documents and the views expressed in the books with Bland. Unfortunately, over the years, this material has permeated much of its scholarship of this period.

Ironically, the authoritative account of this episode *The Hermit of Peking*, was written by a scholar who was later to become known as Lord Dacron. In recent years his reputation has been dimmed by his initialed espousal of the authenticity of the Hitler diaries, which were soon after proved to be forgeries.

### **Post War Scholarship**

With the coming of the Second World War, there was a great need for people trained in Chinese. Especially in America, there was instituted a crash program to train Chinese language specialists. After the war many of these newly trained language specialists became professional Sinologists. As a result, the field developed a critical mass and began to grow by quantum leaps in both the quantity and the quality of the scholarship produced.

Armed with their greater ability to use Chinese sources, the new historians were no longer content to engage in the study of Westerners in China. As their studies progressed, a whole new world seemed to arise before them. Purely Chinese events and sensibilities were given greater stress than they had received in the past.

Despite this new emphasis on things Chinese, most historians initially continued to stress the theme of a Western impact on China and China's response to this impact. Chinese society was still pictured as stagnant, mired in rigid institutions and values that had become congealed in a distant antiquity. It required the dynamism of the Western impact to upset the equilibrium of Chinese society and set free the forces of change.

Many of the earlier works of John K. Fairbank, the dozen of American Sinological studies were imbued with this viewpoint. One of his earliest works, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*, dealt with the interaction of the West and China. The very title of a very influential book that he co-authored with Ssu-yu Teng in 1954, *China's Response to the West*, is indicative of the views of the author. In the very first page of this work the authors wrote that:

“This Western contact, lent impetus by the industrial revolution, had the most disastrous effect upon the old Chinese order. In every sphere of social activity the old order was challenged, attacked, undermined, or overwhelmed by a complex series of processes—political, economic, social, ideological, cultural—which were set in motion within China as a result of this penetration of an alien and more powerful society. The massive structure of traditional society was torn apart”.<sup>1)</sup>

This theme was to be further developed in the work that has for many years been a standard college textbook, *A History of East Asian Civilization*, written by Fairbank, Edwin O. Reischauer and Albert M. Craig. One critic states that in the section of this work dealing with nineteenth-century China, roughly 75 percent of the overall coverage is concerned with “Western related facets of the history of the period”.<sup>2)</sup>

This interpretation of modern Chinese history was to be dominant all during the 1950s and most of the 1960s. In the late sixties, however, many scholars began to find it to be an inadequate means of describing Chinese history.

This was partly due to the disillusionment felt by many scholars, with Western values in the aftermath of the American involvement. It was felt that the supposed equating of Western values with modernity, this with beneficial and superior values, was not valid. Many began to suspect that many of the values of pre-Western societies had a validity even to modern civilization.

Indeed, many of those adopting this viewpoint began to excoriate all Western involvement in Asia as baneful and detrimental. Western Imperialism was to be blamed for all the ills being undergone in modern Asia.

Although this iconoclastic approach did have the benefit of arousing new thinking about accepted tenets of Chinese historiography, it was not an approach that could be profitably used. It was all too obviously open to criticisms about:

“its extreme teleological character, its weak empirical foundations, its rampant use of vague and ill-defined labels (such as ‘feudalism’), and its ultimate acquiescence in a stagnation—Western impact—transformation paradigm of change that had its intellectual origins in the nineteenth century West”<sup>3)</sup>

The main objection to an approach centered on an overwhelming emphasis on a “Western impact—Chinese transformation has become the base not on questions of the truths to be uncovered by such an approach, but instead on the inadequate nature of such an approach in explaining modern Chinese history.

In his work, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China*, Phillip Kuhn was one of the first to express unease with using the Western impact as the central motif in writing about modern Chinese history. Modern Chinese history seemed to have become defined as “that period in which the motion of history is governed primarily by forces exogenous to Chinese society and Chinese tradition”.<sup>4)</sup>

Uncomfortable with this definition, Kuhn launched a study of China before the period of significant Western impact. Instead of finding a society of equilibrium, he found one in the process of attempting to cope with changes so fundamental that "the West was impinging, not just upon a dynasty in decline, but upon a civilization in decline: a civilization that would soon have had to generate fresh forms of social and political organization from within itself".<sup>5)</sup>

Recent research has increasingly come to build upon the importance of internal developments in Chinese history as opposed to the importance of external factors. The next section of this paper will now discuss some of the changes in interpretation that this new approach has generated.

### **The Opium Wars**

Most histories of modern China have usually begun with an account of the Opium Wars. This includes accounts written by Communist histories. Before the wars, it was felt Western influences on China was minimal. The wars were the central event in throwing China open to Western influences. From this influence there developed the wars and upheavals that were to mark Chinese history up to the Communist conquest of power in the next century.

Most western historians, although deploring the opium trade which was the immediate cause of the war, usually assume that the effects of the war were, on the whole, beneficial. The book, *Foreign Mud*, by Maurice Collins would be a rather extreme example of this trend of thought. Today's historians, especially Americans, would have more difficulty in so blithely excusing the actions of drug smugglers while criticizing the actions taken by the Chinese authorities in trying to destroy the trade.

Furthermore, recent studies have de-emphasized the importance of the Opium Wars. Their importance in the diplomatic and economic fields is acknowledged, but they are no longer accorded such central

importance. Accounts of modern Chinese history have been beginning from ever earlier periods. The recently published and widely acclaimed work of Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, pushes back about 400 years to the decline of the Ming Dynasty in its search for the roots of today's events.

The Taiping Rebellion was a seminal event in China's modern history. It has been described as probably being the bloodiest and longest civil war ever.

There can be no doubt that the Taiping Rebellion was greatly influenced by the Western intrusion into China. The war began in the area of China most affected by this intrusion. After the Opium Wars, much trade shifted from Canton to other ports, causing dislocations in trade patterns in an area suffering from severe overpopulation. Widespread piracy and smuggling caused fractures socially and helped develop a large pool of armed men not favorably disposed towards the authorities. The British victories in the Opium Wars also stirred up Cantonese xenophobia towards both Westerners and the ruling Manchus.

Furthermore, there was a direct Western influence on the leaders of the Taiping. The founder of the movement, Hong Xiuquan, was born in 1814 near Canton. His parents were Hakka, a minority group who had migrated from central China many years before. Hong took and failed civil service exams several times. After one failure he collapsed with a fever and had visions. After his fourth failure he happened to read some Christian missionary tracts that had been given to him years earlier. Connecting what he read in the tracts to what he had experienced in his visions years before, he became convinced that he was the younger brother of Jesus and that he had been commissioned to extirpate the Manchus from the earth and institute a "Heavenly Kingdom" with himself as the new emperor.

The Taipings produced an ideology and organization which were unique in Chinese history. All men and women were equal because



of the fatherhood of God. All private property was abolished and wealth was supposed to be placed in common treasuries. Beneath the top leadership of a number of "kings" was a hierarchy of leaders who served concurrently as the military, civil, and religious leaders of their sexually segregated units.

Obviously, there was a great Western influence on the development and use of the Taiping movement. There was also much Western involvement in their suppression by the Manchus and the powerful local gentry. However, it may be argued that this influence was not central to the history of the movement.

For several hundred years China had been experiencing the results of a great demographical explosion, the resulting overpopulation and inflation were causing great distress to the poor. An explosion such as the Taiping Rebellion was probably inevitable. Indeed, in the same period there were a great number of lesser rebellions elsewhere in which Western influence was minimal.

The Taiping movement seen in this light was, therefore, not in any significant sense a Chinese response to a Western impact. Nor could it be described as a significant Chinese response to problems created by a Western impact. It was, instead, a response, heavily influenced by the West, to conditions inside China with roots pre-dating the arrival of Western influence.<sup>6)</sup>

## **Reform**

After the suppression of the Taiping, the Nian and other rebellions, the Zing dynasty instituted a series of reforms usually referred to as the Tongzhi Restoration. Western historians have usually discussed these and later Zing reforms as a response to the West. Zing officials have usually been classified as reformers or conservative opponents of reform.

Recent studies suggest that the situation was much more complex. Most of the reforms debated during the Tongzhi Restoration

were not of a very innovative nature. Many of the measures taken were attempts to restore political institutions and the economy to the conditions they had enjoyed before the eruption of the Taiping and other rebellions.

Only in the military and diplomatic fields were significant innovations made. But the innovations in the military field, the "self-strengthening" movement could be considered as following in a long tradition of Chinese adoption of foreign (i. e., "barbarian") military innovations. And the setting up of the Zongli Yamen to handle diplomatic affairs with the West was seen as a temporary measure. Given the basically conservative goal of the reforms, it would be difficult to describe them as a significant response to Western influence.

Nor can opponents of reforms be classified as obtuse conservatives. The same individual could back certain reforms while opposing others. For example, during the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion, a great increase in the power of the local gentry seems to have taken place. One of the aims of some of the reforms was the re-absorption of some of these powers by the Ting dynasty. While supporting reforms in other areas, the local gentry could be expected to resist moves to decrease their power.

Personal rivalries and internecine bureaucratic warfare could also explain why some officials supported reform while others opposed it. One reason for Li Hongzhang's support of reform may have been that it strengthened Li's position. Rivals of Li could be expected to oppose reform in order to prevent Li from further strengthening his clique's position in the administration. Their opposition would not be based on a matter of principle.

An analogy could be drawn with the Meiji Restoration in Japan. While out of power, opponents of the "bakufu" used the slogan "joi", meaning "expel the barbarians", as a weapon in attacking the bakufu. Once in power they made a big about face on the issue. Likewise, reforms and innovations made by Satsuma and Choshu officials were made as much in order to strengthen their

position in relation to the bakufu as they were made in response to a Western impact.

As in Japan, so, too, in China, there was an interaction of internal politics and external influences. The situation was more complex than a simple matter of liberal reformers, reaction to a Western impact, opposed by obscurantist conservatives.

The career of the empress dowager Cixi, usually depicted as an arch-reactionary, is an example of the actual complexity of the situation. The Tongzhi Restoration took place during her very active regency for the infant Tongzhi Emperor. Later, during the Hundred Days Reform of the Guangxu Emperor, she seems to have come out of semi-retirement to launch a coup and assume power only after learning of moves that were being taken by the reformers in order to launch their own coups.<sup>7)</sup> Maintaining her power seems to have been a greater motivation for her actions than any opposition of reform.

## **Conclusion**

The issues discussed above are only a few of the issues being re-evaluated from a new perspective by Western scholars. Many of the viewpoints inherited from the nineteenth century are being discarded.

From the nineteenth century, modern Western scholars had received an impression of a static, ageless China being faced to respond to the intrusion of a dynamic, modern West. Ethnocentrism and ignorance were most likely the reasons why these views were perpetuated.

Western scholars, albeit often unwittingly, have a tendency to view Chinese society and history in a very patronizing manner due to the greater material wealth of the West and its greater commitment to individual rights. Only in the past few decades have many scholars made a greater effort to appreciate some of the values of

Chinese society that are different from those of the West.

Coupled with this greater respect for Chinese civilization, there has been a development of greater ability to use Chinese archives, and recently greater access to many of those archives. Historians, by the very nature of the craft that they practice, are very veliant on archival materials in making their interpretations of the past. Because of their great reliance on Western sources, many past historians usually wrote histories of Westerners in China or histories of Chinese responses to Western initiatives. The West was always the active element while the Chinese merely reacted to Western catalyts.

With greater exposure to Chinese sources, many historians began to decide that this model was inadequate for analyzing modern China in its entirety.

This is not to say that the Western impact, Chinese reaction model, has been discarded. As shown in our discussion of the Taiping Rebellion, certain areas of China were greatly affected by the Western impact. In studies of such areas, the Western impact model may offer many valuable insights.

Nevertheless, in most recent works there has been a deemphasis on the role of the Western impact and a greater stress on internal Chinese conditions and actions in explaining the major developments of modern Chinese history. Incidentally, this new perspective is quite even in John Fairbank's latest work, *The Great Chinese Revolution: 1800-1985*.

The new approach uncovers a more complex perspective on Chinese. Most scholars believe it to be a more accurate perspective. It is certainly a more colorful and exciting perspective.

It is also an approach that stresses greater continuity in Chinese history. The Western impact has been shown to be unable to explain many important developments. More and more, explanations are being sought deeper in China's own past.

Thus, there is developing an appreciation that China's recent

past has been more complex and more consistent with China's past before the advent of the West. The impact of the West is now regarded as an important influence, but usually not a decisive factor. How important the West's influence was is a matter of ongoing debate. Such debates are rarely concluded to everyone's satisfaction.

#### Notes

- 1) Teng and Fairbank, *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 1.
- 2) Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 11.
- 3) Cohen, p. 111.
- 4) Phillip Kuhn, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China: Militarization and Social Structure, 1796-1864* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 1.
- 5) Kuhn, p. 5.
- 6) Cohen, p. 20.
- 7) Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990), p. 230.

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