



CHINA'S EARLY ENCOUNTERS WITH THE WEST: A History in Reverse

By Andrew Wilson

Andrew Wilson is professor of strategy and policy at the U.S. Naval War College. He is the author of numerous articles on Chinese military history and seapower, Sun Tzu's Art of War, and the Chinese diaspora, and the author or editor of The Chinese Overseas: Ambition and Identity, Chinese Merchant Elites in Colonial Manila, 1885-1916, and The Chinese in the Caribbean. This essay is based on his presentation at the FPRI Wachman Center's March 1-2, 2008 history institute on China's Encounter with the West, held at and co-sponsored by the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Asia Program. See www.fpri.org for videocasts and texts of lectures. Core history institute support is provided by The Annenberg Foundation; additional support for specific programs is provided by W.W. Keen Butcher, Bruce H. Hooper, John M. Templeton, Jr., the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. The next history weekends are America in the Civil War Era, May 17-18, 2008 (Carthage College, WI); What Students Need to Know About America's Wars, Part I: 1622-1919, July 26-27, 2008 (Wheaton, IL); and Teaching the History of Innovation, October 18-19 (Kansas City, MO).

I am going to look at the history of China's encounters with the West in reverse order, beginning with the more familiar storyline of China as a weak and battered power in the modern era and closing with a different model from the premodern era.

Many of the causes for China's being a failed state in the early twentieth century had their roots in China's disadvantageous relations with the West. The warlordism and foreign imperialism that marked this era were a direct outgrowth of the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911-12, which left a monstrous political vacuum. The fall of the Qing in turn was largely the result of an unremitting series of body blows directed at the prestige, sovereignty, military power, and economic well-being of the Chinese empire. This is the historical memory that dominates the national consciousness of contemporary China.

The story of China as victim in this unequal relationship is powerful, but it does not tell the whole story. Much of the pain suffered in China in this period was self-inflicted. Even in the face of defeat the Qing made conscious decisions to play Western powers against one another in the contest for Chinese favors and access to the China market. This worked well in preventing any single Western power from gaining dominant leverage over China, but it also invited competition among dynamic European states that in the long run were damaging to Chinese prosperity and sovereignty. Nor does this narrative give enough attention to the positive results of Sino-Western interaction in the modern era: the contributions of Westerners to modern Chinese art, science, education, medicine, and law. An excessive focus on China as victim also obscures those times when China held the upper hand economically, technologically, and militarily over Westerners at the far-flung ends of their nascent maritime empires.

Asymmetric Encounters, Model A: China as the Weak Power

The Boxer Rebellion of 1899-1900 was the watershed event that ushered in the twentieth century in East Asia and the most inexcusable foreign relations blunder the Qing Dynasty ever made. In 1898, flood and famine in North China were blamed on Western rail and telegraph lines that were disrupting the geo-mantic balance (*fengshui*) of the region. When these fears were coupled with popular animosity toward foreign privileges and Christian missionaries, those missionaries and their Chinese converts became the targets of a popular uprising led by the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists, known in the West as "Boxers." The Boxers were a millenarian religious sect that practiced forms of *gongfu* that promised to make them impervious to firearms. Some local governors aggressively suppressed the movement, but the reactionary Qing court foolishly tried to coopt the Boxers as a way to exploit the primordial passions of the Chinese people to drive the foreign presence from North China.

With official sanction, the movement spread rapidly, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of foreigners and tens of thousands of Chinese Christians. In the Spring of 1900 the Boxers, with the help of the imperial army, entered Beijing, laid siege to the foreign legation district, bludgeoned the Japanese legation chief to death and shot and killed the German ambassador. International condemnation followed quickly, but the Qing compounded its mistakes by declaring war on all foreign powers. An international force relieved the legation siege on August 14, looted Beijing, and forced the royal family to flee. After this humiliation the Qing court signed the Boxer Protocol--the last of the infamous "unequal treaties" forced on the Qing--which established permanent garrisons of foreign troops in the capital and along the routes between Beijing and the sea, in addition to an indemnity of 450 million taels of silver.

But the Boxer debacle was just the latest in a long string of defeats. A war with Japan in 1894-95 over China's traditional sphere of influence in Korea was no less humiliating. In 1894 Chinese troops had suppressed a rebellion in Korea at the request of the Korean court, but Japan had used the pretext of disorder to dispatch 8,000 troops to protect Japanese interests and to wring concessions from the Koreans. Initially the Chinese sought a diplomatic solution to the crisis, by assuring British or Russian mediation, but this only gave the Japanese more time to mobilize and to wage a Western style war against a larger albeit far less Westernized foe. In the hostilities that followed, the Japanese military success was total, including lopsided victories on both land and sea.

The 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki called for Korean independence and the termination of tribute missions to China--in other words, a recognition of Japanese suzerainty; a 200 million tael indemnity; the cession of Taiwan, the Pescadores and the Liaodong Peninsula; and a variety of trade concessions. The period between the Sino-Japanese war and the Boxer Rebellion was the high tide of the foreign "scramble for concessions," with Germany consolidating a sphere of influence in Shandong, the Russians in Manchuria, the French in the Southwest, and the British in the lower Yangzi region, the Southeast coast, as well as peeling away Burma and Tibet from Qing control.

That war in the 1890s was preceded by the loss of yet another traditional buffer in Vietnam to French control in the Sino-French War of 1884-1885. During the 1870s a series of treaties with the Nguyen Dynasty gave France a *de facto* protectorate over the region, but Vietnam was still a vassal of the Qing Dynasty, a fact which the Vietnamese emperor tried to use to limit French control. Under increasing pressure from the French, the Nguyen emperor sought military aid from China, but a French preemptive strike destroyed the Qing's southern fleet and doomed the Chinese war effort. In a formal ceremony, the Nguyen emperor broke the jade disc that signified his submission to the Qing and accepted French suzerainty.

Their defeat in Indochina came as a shock to the Qing ruling elite, who had spent the preceding two decades reforming and expanding their military. In fact, many of the leading officials in this period had come to prominence as military commanders charged with suppressing the great internal

rebellions of the mid-nineteenth century. While ultimately successful in ending these three massive rebellions--the Taiping 1850-64, the Nien (1851-68), and the Muslim (1855-78)--their reforms were uneven and often superficial, and the Qing state was fraught with institutional divisions and internecine rivalries. The internal disorder wrought by these rebellions, including some 30-50 million dead, further hamstrung the faltering Qing. Nonetheless, in this period the Qing had enjoyed a two-decade respite from foreign aggression.

The last major war had been the Arrow War (1856-60), sometimes called the Second Opium War, which ended when a combined Franco-British army invaded Beijing, forced the imperial family to flee, burned the magnificent Summer Palace at Yuanmingyuan, and imposed a punitive settlement on the Qing court. To this day the ruins of Yuanmingyuan are a popular place for Chinese to stroll, to picnic, and to remember the West's rapacity. In addition to the Beijing Convention between the Chinese, the British, and the French that ended the Arrow War--a treaty which opened more ports, ceded Kowloon to Britain, and secured missionary rights, diplomatic residence and an indemnity--the Russians signed a separate convention that recognized their interests in Central Asia, opened Kashgar and Mongolia to Russian trade, and ceded all of the lands north of the Amur River and East of the Ussuri river (300,000 square miles of territory). This settlement gave Russia a dominant position in continental Northeast Asia and opened the door for its subsequent penetration of Manchuria.

This trend of military defeat and humiliating concessions began with the most emblematic of China's sad encounters with the west, the Opium War of 1839-42. Since the sixteenth century China was the most aggressive consumer of silver in the world, but at the end of the eighteenth century the British discovered that the Chinese would buy Indian opium, and in huge quantities. The silver liberated from the Chinese economy by Indian opium kept the British Empire liquid throughout the Napoleonic wars, funded Britain's post-1815 industrial and mercantile surge, and impelled its consolidation of the Indian holdings. But the opium trade was less than salutary for China. The silver drain had far-reaching implications for the domestic economy, and the widespread consumption of potent Indian opium was disastrous for the empire, due in no small part to the fact that soldiers and bureaucrats were often the heaviest users.

When Qing authorities intervened to halt the trade in 1838-39, primarily by seizing opium cargoes in Canton and holding foreign nationals hostage until they renounced the trade, the British responded with force. A small British expeditionary force blockaded or occupied Chinese ports up and down the coast. Chinese troops and weaponry were no match for British and Indian Regulars armed with the best of British arms. When British steam-driven gunships threatened Nanjing, the dynasty had no choice but to relent. The 1842 Treaty of Nanjing included a substantial indemnity, the end of the Canton system, the opening of four additional ports, the cession of Hong Kong, equality in official correspondence, and a fixed tariff. The treaty of Nanjing set the model for all subsequent treaties, and while this seems like a fairly minor war, the Qing defeat raised a fundamental question of whether a China-centered balance-

of-power system, which depended on the military power and prestige of the Qing, could survive.

Looked at in reverse, the history of Chinese encounters with the West in the nineteenth century is thus a tale of woe and inexorable decline. With the benefit of that hindsight, the first formal encounter between Great Britain and the Qing Dynasty, a meeting that took place in the Summer of 1793, looks like a study in self-deception and hubris. That encounter was between Lord George Macartney, an Irish peer and former Governor of India, and Qianlong, the fourth emperor of the Qing Dynasty. Macartney had been dispatched by King George III in the hopes of opening formal diplomatic relations with the Qing and of opening more Chinese ports to British trade. London was particularly frustrated by the "Canton system," which limited all Western maritime trade with China to the single port of Canton, thus denying the influential British East India Company access to much of the huge and prosperous Chinese market. Commercial pressure was particularly acute because of the gross trade imbalance between Britain and China at this point, with some 80 percent of the value of foreign cargoes landing at Canton consisting of silver. Before opium, there was little that Chinese merchants wanted to trade for their silks, porcelains and tea other than silver.

Macartney arrived at the emperor's summer retreat on the occasion of the Qianlong's 83rd birthday and presented him with an array of the finest products of British manufacture--woolens, a pair of dueling pistols and an exquisite mantel clock. Qianlong, however, evinced little interest in negotiating for close relations with a country "in a remote and inaccessible region, far across the spaces of ocean." In his formal reply to George III, in which he denied all of the British requests, the emperor noted:

I set no value on objects strange or ingenious and have no use for your country's manufactures...Our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders. There was therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce. But as the tea, silk and porcelain which the Celestial Empire produces, are absolute necessities to European nations and to yourselves, we have permitted, as a signal mark of favor, that foreign *hongs* should be established at Canton, so that your wants might be supplied and your country thus participate in our beneficence. Nevertheless, I do not forget the lonely remoteness of your island, cut off from the world by intervening wastes of sea, nor do I overlook your excusable ignorance of the usages of our Celestial Empire.... Should your vessels touch the shore, your merchants will assuredly never be permitted to land or to reside there, but will be subject to instant expulsion. In that event your barbarian merchants will have had a long journey for nothing. Do not say that you were not warned in due time! Tremblingly obey and show no negligence!

Given the subsequent history of China's encounters with the outside world, Macartney's appraisal of the Qing is particularly prescient:

The Empire of China is an old, crazy, First rate man-of-war, which a fortunate succession of able and vigilant officers has contrived to keep afloat for these one hundred and fifty years past, and to overawe their neighbors merely by her bulk and appearance, but whenever an insufficient man happens to have the command upon deck, adieu to the discipline and

safety of the ship. She may perhaps not sink outright; she may drift some time as a wreck, and will then be dashed to pieces on the shore; but she can never be rebuilt on the old bottom.

Certainly lesser men than Qianlong came to the helm of the Chinese ship of state in the nineteenth century, but we must give Qianlong and the Qing Dynasty a great deal of credit for the scale and scope of the empire's power and influence.

Asymmetric Encounters, Model B: China as the Dominant Power

Qianlong's predecessors had conquered all of China and extended Qing suzerainty over numerous vassal states. By the end of Qianlong's reign, the empire stretched from Mongolia to the borders of Vietnam, Taiwan to Central Asia: 5 million square miles and a population of more than 200 million (at its height Napoleon's empire covered 600,000 square miles and had a population of 46 million). Qianlong was the consummate universal monarch. He spoke, read, and wrote Manchu, Chinese, Mongol, Uighur and Tibetan. He was the patriarch of half-a-dozen different religions and the cultural microcosm of the Qing State. He was an accomplished painter, calligrapher, and poet, and a patron of the arts who retained the best artists, architects and clockmakers (many of them Jesuit missionaries). He was also a skilled archer, musketeer, and horseman, who planned a series of grand campaigns that brought Central Asia under Qing rule and once and for all quashed the Mongol threat that had plagued China for centuries. Qianlong was also a bejeweled cog in the great bureaucratic machine that was the Chinese Empire. He perused hundreds of official documents daily, performed the ritual sacrifices to heaven, adjudicated legal cases, promulgated laws, formulated strategy, and conducted diplomacy. By all measures Qianlong was the most powerful monarch of the entire eighteenth century and the Qing the most powerful land power of the age and the most sophisticated state to that point in history.

China at the end of the eighteenth century is thus a very different type of state than we see in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rather than an imploding empire fraught with crises and opportunities for foreign exploitation, China at the height of the Qing was a state that exerted a remarkable gravitational pull. Within the Asian region the Qing's hard and soft power kept all of its immediate neighbors solidly within its orbit, and the lure of the China market had long since drawn Western merchants into Asian waters. We cannot fault Qianlong too much for being full of himself, nor can we reasonably expect him to have been able to predict that the Great Britain that came begging for concessions in 1793 would emerge from the Napoleonic Wars fundamentally transformed and capable of projecting the military and economic power that would so weaken the Qing's gravitational pull. One could argue that Qianlong's world view is natural for a conqueror. After all, he was a Manchu, not a Han Chinese, and both he and his ancestors thought in terms of conquest and subjugation. But if we move even further back in time to the sixteenth century, the first period of sustained interaction with the West, we see the Chinese state, this time ruled by Han Chinese, thinking very much like Qianlong.

Europeans had made their first forays into East Asian waters in the early years of the sixteenth century and by the 1580s had established trading enclaves at Malacca, Batavia, Macao, Manila and Nagasaki. They were drawn there because China was driving the world economy and because they now had the European and American silver to pay for Chinese luxury goods, but these were far from the great Western powers of the nineteenth century. They were bit players in a regional drama that culminated in the largest and bloodiest war of the sixteenth century; the Imjin War (1592-98) between Ming China, its Korean ally (the Choson dynasty) and Toyotomi Hideyoshi's Japan. It was also the first globalized war. All of the armies involved in that contest were armed with small arms and cannon either purchased from Europeans or adapted from European designs. Foreign observers and advisors, most notably Portuguese and Dutch, chronicled and in some cases participated in the campaigns. Moreover, given the logistical and financial demands of carrying on a protracted war on a massive scale each belligerent was heavily reliant on foreign trade to finance their efforts and on foreign military expertise and technology to out-do their adversaries on land and at sea.

The ultimate victor of the Imjin War was Ming China, the most economically and militarily dynamic state in Asia, if not the world. Its economy was booming, not least because of foreign trade, and the Ming possessed a potent military that was at the cutting edge of a military-technological revolution: professionally-led mass infantry armies equipped with standardized firearms, supported by artillery, cavalry and naval forces, and dependent on immense and complicated logistical structures. The Ming emerged from the war with unquestioned primacy, an attitude reflected in the following exchange between Chinese and Spanish officials regarding compensation to Chinese in Manila (*Sangleys*) in the aftermath of a bloody riot and massacre in 1603. First from the Fujian viceroy:

It is long since anyone has dared to give offense to this kingdom; and although the Japanese have endeavored to disturb Korea, which is under the government of China, they have been unable to succeed therewith, and have been driven from the said kingdom, and Korea has remained in great peace and quiet, as the people of Luzon know well from what has been told them.... If the Castilians show justice to the Chinese, send back the *Sangleys* who have survived the war, and pay the money due for the goods taken from the *Sangleys*, there will be amity between this kingdom and that, and merchant vessels will sail there every year. If not, the king [the Wanli emperor] will not permit merchant vessels to make the voyage, but will command a thousand vessels of war to be built with a force of soldiers--relatives of the deceased, and inhabitants of the other nations and kingdoms that pay tribute to China; and, without having mercy upon anyone, they will make war, and afterward the kingdom of Luzon will be given to that people which will pay tribute to China.

The Spanish Governor Pedro de Acuna's response:

As for the statement that the letter is sent to let me know the greatness of the king of China and of his realm and that no one should dare offend it, and referring to the war in Korea—to this I answer that the Spaniards have measured by palms, and that very exactly, all the countries belonging to all the kings and lordships in the world. Since the Chinese have no commerce with foreign nations, it seems to them that there is no other country but their own, and that there is no higher greatness than theirs; but if he knew the power of some of the kings with whom my sovereign, the king of the Hespans, carries on continual war, the whole of China would seem to him very small. The king of China would do well to notice that from here to the court of Hespans the distance is five thousand leguas; and that on the voyage thither are two kingdoms, Nueva Hespans and Peru, whose territory is so great that it is almost equal to that of China, without mentioning very large islands in those seas. At the same time I know that the kingdom of China is governed with much wisdom, and all the people here know, and I know, of the war in Korea.

I like this exchange not merely for its bravado, but primarily for the fact that it is the Spaniard who is deluding himself. Despite the dramatic expansion of the Spanish empire over the preceding century, China was not the Americas, and that lonely Spanish enclave in Manila would have been no match for the might of the Ming had they chosen to act.

Legacy

Which model, A or B, works best? Neither. China is no longer failed state, nor is China now the regional hegemon. Certainly its economic pull is powerful, but it has neither the decisive military advantages nor the soft power that the high Qing or the late-Ming states enjoyed.

One element that might endure of the hegemon model is the disparity between how the two sides view the world, or more precisely how they wish the world to be. We see this in the difference between Qianlong's condescending response to George III and Macartney's assessment of the Qing ship of state and in the even more heated exchange between Acuna and the Ming governor. In today's world we have a hard time imagining any innate hostility or danger in the future of U.S.-China relations or in Sino-Western relations, barring of course Taiwan, but even there the threat seems quite low. The benefits of globalization, free trade, and political liberalization vastly outweigh the costs of confrontation.

But are we ignoring a Chinese perspective and mirror-imaging their world view? Whereas Qianlong and the late Ming were conditioned to view their empire at the apex of the family of nations, our Chinese interlocutors were conditioned to see China as a victim and to view with skepticism rosy projections of the benefits of further relaxation of what we instinctively view as anachronistic claims of sovereignty and authoritarianism.