

# ISSUE 16

## Were Confucian Values Responsible for China's Failure to Modernize?

YES: John King Fairbank, from *The Great Chinese Revolution: 1800-1985* (Harper & Row, 1986)

NO: Jonathan D. Spence, from *The Search for Modern China* (W. W. Norton, 1990)

### ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: History professor John King Fairbank makes the case that conservative forces, rooted in the Confucian virtues, subverted attempts by some to bring China into the modern world.

NO: History professor Jonathan D. Spence offers an economic analysis that draws on the ideas of Adam Smith and Karl Marx to explain China's initial failure to modernize and the role that foreign powers played in its eventual modernization.

Most China scholars would agree that China's failure to modernize may be traced to a combination of internal and external forces—the uniquely Chinese version of traditionalism rooted in classic texts attributed to the philosopher Confucius and the economic realities of a worldwide market economy. For centuries both China and Japan remained aloof from the rest of the world. China, in particular, thought of itself as the Middle Kingdom, the center of the universe, and its centuries of scholarship and high culture had convinced many that China had nothing to learn from upstarts in the “barbarian West.” Whereas Japan chose to enter the modern world on its own terms in the late nineteenth century, China refused to do so. This decision has had far-reaching consequences for China and continues to puzzle historians.

To look at an internal cause thesis, we must consider the writings of Confucius, which date back to the sixth century B.C.E., and which became deeply embedded in Chinese society 2,000 years later. Focusing on proper behavior and patterns of deference, the Confucian system stressed the practice of virtue—especially the cardinal virtues of faithfulness, sincerity, earnestness, and respectfulness—as the route to a stable social order and a defense against forces of corruption. Children were schooled to obey parents, wives to submit to husbands, younger siblings to look to older siblings for guidance and ministers to be guided by rulers. The system of examinations—the path to civil service jobs that remained in effect until 1905—was based on knowledge

of the Confucian classics. Some scholars hold that continuing to honor these premodern values accounts for China's failure to modernize.

However, external factors also may have played a role. When we look at China's history during the last century, we cannot fail to take into account its large land mass and growing population. Economists, beginning with Adam Smith in his influential book *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), noted that while China was not amassing further wealth, its population was continuing to expand, which cheapened both labor and the value of human life. In the nineteenth century, the German philosopher Karl Marx saw Asia as being outside the influence of what his mentor G. W. F. Hegel had called the “World Spirit” in its march through history. As European powers invaded China and exploited its economic resources, some historians blamed China's failure to modernize on capitalist imperialism, a clearly external force.

In the following selection, John King Fairbank (1901–1991) chooses to put the explanatory emphasis on conservative forces within China. He argues that ethnocentrism, the belief that one's own culture is superior to all others, made China smugly confident of its ability to keep its old ways and prosper. Confucian platitudes, combined with the conservatism of the imperial dynasty, subverted the forces of modernization and made China vulnerable to invasion by the Western powers.

In the second selection, Jonathan D. Spence summarizes the economic explanation that came into general acceptance during the first decades of the twentieth century. He notes that Marx, following the analysis of Hegel, had left Asia out of the historic development of world cultures under the guidance of the World Spirit. Left to its self-imposed isolation, China (according to Smith's analysis and Hegel's model) would never modernize. The only hope for China, Hegel and Marx agreed, would be for the Western powers to plant the seeds of their superior mode of production and more fully developed notion of freedom in Chinese soil.

## EFFORTS AT MODERNIZATION

The forty years beginning in 1860 form a distinct era in the buildup of the Chinese Revolution—a time when the old system seemed to work again and some Western ways were adopted, yet China's progress was so comparatively slow that she became a sitting duck for greater foreign aggression. The imperialist rivalry of the powers came to a terrifying climax in the 1898 "scramble for concessions," and the period ended with troops of eight nations occupying Peking in 1900. Obviously these were the four decades when China missed the boat. While Japan ended her seclusion, adroitly began to Westernize, got rid of her unequal treaties, and was prepared to become a world power, why did China fail to do the same?

This question has haunted Chinese patriots throughout the twentieth century. At first the explanation was found in Social Darwinism. China had simply lost out in the competition for survival among nations. Partly this was due to her tardiness in ceasing to be an ancient empire and becoming a modern nation. The fault lay within.

By 1920, however, a more satisfying explanation was offered by Marxism-Leninism. The fault lay with the capitalist imperialism of the foreign powers who invaded China, secured special privileges under the unequal treaties, exploited Chinese markets and resources, and suppressed the stirrings of Chinese capitalism. Since many foreigners announced loudly that they were going to do just that, all sides could agree. The same decades saw the triumph of colonialism all around China's periphery: Burma and Malaysia were taken over by Britain, Vietnam by France, Taiwan by Japan. Foreign aggression and exploitation were too plain to be denied.

Two generations of argument over these explanatory theories have come to rest in the 1980s on a "both... and" formula: internal weakness invited foreign invasion, just as Confucius said 2,500 years ago. The real argument has been over the proportions between the two and the timing of their influence. As the onward march of scholarship helps us to learn more about China within, I believe the claims of Marxism-Leninism will be watered down as time goes on but no one can deny their validity in many important respects.

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How does this apply to 1861-94? The era began with a joint leadership of Manchus and Chinese, at Peking and in the provinces, who agreed on a general program of appeasing the Anglo-French invaders while suppressing the Chinese rebels. There are few better examples of how to turn weakness into strength, though sometimes at the expense of the Chinese populace.

By mid-1860 a revived Taiping offensive had invaded the Yangtze delta, taking the major cities of Hangchow and Soochow and threatening Shanghai, while at the same time an Anglo-French army arrived off Tientsin in two hundred ships, and fought its way to Peking. Facing this double disaster, the Manchu leadership executed a neat double appeasement: they finally gave Tseng Kuo-fan supreme command against the Taipings, abandoning the old rule that Chinese civil officials should not control armies in the provinces, and they accepted the Anglo-French demands to open China further to foreign trade and proselytism. As they put it in the dynastic councils, the rebels were an "organic disease," the foreigners merely an "affliction of the limbs." (This of course would be the way Chiang Kai-shek phrased his problems with Japanese invasion and Communist rebellion in the 1930s and 1940s.) All the British wanted was trade; so their opium trade was legalized and inland trade on the Yangtze promised them as soon as the Taipings (who stubbornly prohibited opium) should have been destroyed.

American and British mercenaries, like R. T. Ward of Salem, Massachusetts, were hired to use steamers and artillery in amphibious warfare around Shanghai. Having got the terms they wanted at Peking, the British and French abandoned neutrality and let officers like C. G. "Chinese"

Gordon fight the Taipings while, even more important, foreign merchants sold Remingtons and howitzers to the imperial armies. Anglo-French forces had returned from humbling Peking to defend Shanghai and the Yangtze delta, and so help save the dynasty.

In this way the Ch'ing restoration of the 1860s secured foreign help while still expounding the classical ideology of rule by virtue. Tseng Kuo-fan... set the tone of the restoration by his admirable strength of character and rather simple-minded faith in the Confucian ideals of proper behavior:

"Barbarian affairs are hard to manage," he wrote his understudy Li Hung-chang in 1862, "but the basic principles are no more than the four words of Confucius: *ch'ing, hsih, hi, and ch'ing*—faithfulness, sincerity, earnestness and respectfulness.... Hsih means merely not to tell a lie, but it is very difficult to avoid doing so...."

"Confucius says, 'If you can rule your own country, who dares to insult you?' If we are unified, strict and sober, and if hundreds of measures are fostered, naturally the foreigners will not insult and affront us without reason." (Obviously, a man so indoctrinated with the Confucian virtues could be entrusted with the fate of the dynasty.)

"In your association with foreigners," Tseng told Li, "your manner and deportment should not be too lofty, and you should have a slightly vague, casual appearance. Let their insults, deceitfulness, and contempt for everything appear to be understood by you and yet seem not understood, for you should look somewhat stupid."

What better prescription could one suggest for swallowing pride and appeasing an invader? The Manchus at

court had quoted the ancient saying "Resort to peace and friendship when temporarily obliged to do so; use war and defense as your actual policy." The dynasty and its Chinese ruling class were in the soup together.

After Tseng Kuo-fan died in 1872 the lead in dealing with foreigners for the next thirty years was taken by Li Hung-chang, a tall (over six feet), vigorous, and extremely intelligent realist, who was eager to take responsibility and became adept at hanging on to power. He was devoted to the art of the possible and, working within that limitation, became the leading modernizer of his day. Although Li Hung-chang himself went around the world only toward the end of his career in 1896, he realized from the first moment his troops got their Remington rifles that foreign things were the key to China's defense and survival. He became the leading advocate of what Peking a century later under Deputy Premier Deng Hsiao-p'ing would call "modernization."

Li had benefited from the fact that his father had been a classmate of Tseng Kuo-fan in the top examination of 1838. After Li won his provincial degree, he studied under Tseng at Peking. He got his own top degree there in 1847, and in the early 1850s went back to his native place (Ho-fei in Anhwei) to organize militia against the rebels, much as Tseng was doing in Hunan. He assisted the provincial governor in campaigns and then in 1859 joined Tseng Kuo-fan's staff, became his chief secretary, and drafted his correspondence. When the Ch'ing court was finally obliged to give Tseng overall command in 1860, Li had his chance.

Backed by Tseng to organize his own Anhwei army on the model of Tseng's

Hunan army, Li in April 1862 used seven foreign steamers hired by refugee gentry to bring his troops down the Yangtze to Shanghai. At age thirty-nine he now became governor of Kiangsu province at the fulcrum of Sino-foreign relations. Shanghai he found to be an Anglo-French military base, with foreign troops far better armed and trained than his Chinese forces. Troops so armed could take over China! Indeed, he feared "the hearts of the officials and of the people have long since gone over to the foreigners." He felt himself "breathing on frost over ice." Could Shanghai be kept from a foreign takeover? Li rushed to buy Western arms and build up his Anhwei army. Within two years he had forty thousand men with ten thousand rifles and cannon using thirty-six-pound shells. He got Western cooperation against the Taipings but kept it strictly within limits.

In this way Li Hung-chang moved in on the ground floor of the late Ch'ing establishment. Having qualified first as a scholar, he won the dynasty's confidence as a general commanding troops. His Anhwei army helped surround and strangle the Taipings in the Lower Yangtze and then in the late 1860s finished off the Nien rebels, whose cavalry had been raiding all across North China. Purchasing foreign rifles, setting up arsenals, and drilling troops gave the dynasty the edge over dissident peasants from this time on. Simultaneously the British with their gunboats and troops at Hong Kong and the treaty ports and on the Yangtze became an integral part of China's power structure, helping to maintain political order in the interests of foreign trade....

Li Hung-chang's diplomatic efforts gave him high visibility, and Western journalists occasionally touted him as the

"Bismarck of the East." The comparison can be instructive. Li Hung-chang (1823-1901) no doubt had many of the abilities of his German contemporary Otto von Bismarck (1815-98). He was a big man, an astute diplomat and energetic administrator, above all a realistic practitioner of the possible, who for forty years played principal roles in China. But, while Bismarck between 1862 and 1890 engineered and won three wars to create the German empire and dominate central Europe, Li confronted rebellions at home and foreign aggression on China's borders that led the Ch'ing empire steadily downhill. While Bismarck was fashioning a new balance of power in Europe, Li had to deal with the breakup of the Ch'ing tribute system that had once provided a kind of international order in East Asia. The Iron Chancellor held central executive power among a people already leading the way in modern science, industrial technology, and military nationalism. Li Hung-chang never held central power but only represented Peking as a provincial governor-general. His influence hung by the thread of his loyalty to the regent for two boy emperors in succession, the Empress Dowager Tz'u-hsi, a clever, ignorant woman intent on preserving Manchu rule at all costs. Li's loyalty to his ruler had to be expressed in large gifts and unquestioning sycophancy to the point where in 1888-94 Li's North China navy, racing against Japan's naval buildup, had to divert its funds to build Tz'u-hsi's new summer palace. In place of a Bleichroder, who financed Bismarck in the churches, Li Hung-chang had to collect his own squeeze by the usual age-old flogging from his official funds.

After he negotiated the secret Russo-Chinese alliance in 1896 he received a personal gift of a million rubles. Some said

he amassed a fortune worth \$40 million. It is plain that he got some things done, but he led the late Ch'ing effort at modernization only by persistent pushing and constant manipulation of an intractable environment.

This was a two-front struggle, to find out the practical secrets of Western power and also to convince indoctrinated fellow officials that imitating the West was necessary. Tseng Kuo-fan, for example, supported the Shanghai Arsenal and it built a steamship, on which he even ventured to sail. But he opposed telegraphs, railways, and other uses of Western technology as likely to harm Chinese livelihood and give foreigners too much influence. Li had to steer a devious and indirect course. For instance, Tseng offered him the conventional Confucian wisdom (or *balderdash*) that "warfare depends on men, not weapons" (an old idea, but modified today by a thought of Mao Tse-tung). Li countered by describing British and French warships he had visited. "I feel deeply ashamed," he said, at China's inferiority in weapons. "Every day I warn and instruct my officers to be humbled-minded; to bear the humiliation, to learn one or two secret methods from the West-erners."

If we recall the American need in public discussions of the Cold War era to first reassure an audience that Communism, the enemy, was not for us, we can sympathize with Li Hung-chang's problem. To the court at Peking he wrote in 1863: "Everything in China's civil and military system is far superior to the West. Only in firearms it is absolutely impossible to catch up with them. Why? Because in China the way of making machines is for the scholars to understand the principles, while the artisans put them into practice.... The two do not consult each

other... But foreigners are different... I have learned that when Western scholars make weapons, they use mathematics for reference."

Li also pointed to the Japanese success in learning to navigate steamships and make cannon. If China could stand on her own feet militarily, he prophesied, the Japanese "will attack themselves to us." But if not, "then the Japanese will imitate the Westerners and will share the Westerners' sources of profits."

By 1864 Li ventured to recommend that science and technology be added to the topics in the examination system. From today's point of view this was surely the starting point for China's adaptation to the modern world. But the idea never had a chance. Even the proposal that regular degree holders be recruited to study Western science in the interpreters' college that Hart was financing at Peking, and in similar small government schools at Shanghai and Canton, was shot down. The imperial tutor Wo-jen, a Mongol who dominated the Peking literary bureaucracy, spoke for the orthodox majority: "The way to establish a nation is to stress propriety and righteousness, not power and plotting... the minds of people, not technology... The barbarians are our enemies. In 1860 they rebelled against us." They invaded Peking, he continued, burned the imperial summer palace, killed our people. "How can we forget this humiliation even for a single day?" Why, he asked, was it necessary to "seek trifling arts and respect barbarians as teachers?... Since the conclusion of the peace [in 1860], Christianity has been prevalent and half our ignorant people [the Taipings] have been fooled by it... Now if talented scholars have to change from their regular course of study to follow the barbarians... it will

drive the multitude of the Chinese people into allegiance to the barbarians... Should we further spread their influence and fan the flame?"

These sentiments coincided with the vested interest of every scholar who taught, the classics. Modern learning was effectively kept out of the examinations until they were finally abolished in 1905.

The modernization of China thus became a game played by a few high officials who realized its necessity and tried to raise funds, find personnel, and set up projects in a generally lethargic if not unfriendly environment. Hope of personal profit and power led them on, but the Empress Dowager's court, unlike the Meiji Emperor's in Japan, gave them no firm or consistent backing. Tz'u-hsi on the contrary found it second nature to let the ideological conservatives like Wo-jen stalemate the innovators so that she could hold the balance. Since South China was as usual full of bright spirits looking for new opportunities, especially in the rapidly growing treaty-port cities, the late nineteenth century was a time of much pioneering but little basic change. Westernization was left to the efforts of a few high provincial officials partly because this suited the central-local balance of power—the court could avoid the cost and responsibility—and partly because treaty-port officials in contact with foreigners were the only ones who could see the opportunities and get foreign help.

On this piecemeal basis Li Hung-chang found allies in Cantonese entrepreneurs whose long contact with Westerners gave them new channels to climb up. For example there was a T'ang clan based ten miles from Macao who grew rich making shrimp sauce and selling it there. The

clan steadily gained influence during the nineteenth century as its members passed local and provincial examinations. However, Tong King-sing (T'ang T'ing-shu, 1832-92) opened up a new channel. He learned English in a missionary school, became an interpreter in the Hong Kong police court and the Shanghai customs house, and after 1863 grew wealthy as Jardine's top comprador. From investing in pawn shops and native banks he moved on to shipping companies, insurance, and even a newspaper. Meanwhile he bought degree status and an official title, which the dynasty was now selling for revenue. From 1873 Li Hung-chang got Tong's assistance in his industrial-development projects.

Instead of battling his fellow Confucians on the intellectual front, Li found it easier to compete with foreign economic enterprise in China. China's domestic commerce in private hands was already actively expanding. Li pursued the traditional idea of enlisting Chinese merchant capital in projects that would be "supervised by officials but undertaken by merchants," something like the salt trade. After all, the proportion of China's national income that passed through the governments hands and sticky fingers was still very low.

Li in 1872 started a joint-stock steamship line, even calling it the China Merchants Steamship Company, and soon got Tong King-sing to be the manager. But merchant capital came forward only in small amounts. The crash of 1877 allowed Li to buy up the fleet of Russell and Company, the Boston firm that with Chinese merchant help had inaugurated steamboating on the Yangtze. But a majority of the funds had to come from official sources. When in 1885 Robert Hart lent one

of his young customs commissioners (H. B. Morse, Harvard '74) to advise the China Merchants' managers, Morse found the company overloaded with personnel and being milked of its profits. It survived by hauling the tribute rice to Tientsin and making rate deals with the British lines of Jardine, Matheson & Company and Butterfield and Swire, who continued for the next fifty years under the unequal treaty system to dominate water transport within China.

When Li Hung-chang in 1876 started the Kaiping coal mine north of Tientsin to fuel his steamships and give them return cargo to Shanghai, he made Tong manager of the mining company. At Kaiping Tong brought in a dozen Western engineers and installed modern pumps, fans, and hoists. Soon Kaiping had a machine shop, telephones and telegraphs, and a small railway, and was producing 250,000 tons of coal a year. It was so successful that Peking could not keep its hands off. A Chinese squeeze artist from the court succeeded Tong, squeezed the company dry, and kept it going mainly on foreign loans. Finally in the Boxer crisis of 1900 a British company, represented by an up-and-coming American mining engineer named Herbert C. Hoover, got control of it. China's legal counsel in London later claimed that this takeover was almost indistinguishable from grand larceny. After 1912 the Kaiping mines were run by the Anglo-Chinese Kailan Mining Administration.

A similar spottiness marked Li's first venture in sending students abroad. This had been proposed by another Cantonese, a school classmate of Tong named Yung W'ing, who had gone so far as to accept missionary support and make it to Yale. He became Yale's first

Chinese graduate, in 1854. Trying to make himself useful back in China, he was eventually sent out to buy the machinery for the Shanghai Arsenal. Finally in 1872 he was given charge of the Chinese educational mission that during the next decade brought 120 long-gowned Chinese youths to America. The first batch, selected by Tong King-sing, included seven of his relatives, and the third group, his nephew T'ang Shao-i.

On the advice of the Connecticut commissioner of education, Yung Wing set up headquarters in Hartford, but President Porter of Yale suggested the students should board with families up and down the Connecticut Valley. Soon they learned to tuck their queues under their caps and play very smart baseball, while Yung Wing himself married Mary Louise Kellogg of Avon, Connecticut. Yung Wing's co-supervisor, a proper long-gowned scholar, was horrified: the boys were becoming barbarized. They were not mastering the classics in preparation for their examinations back in China. In 1881 the project was abandoned. Chinese students came to America again only thirty years later, not as young teenagers, and without their queues and classics, after the end of the dynasty.

The 120 students from the Hartford project made their mark in China's foreign relations and industrialization after 1900. If the project had continued after 1881, China's modern history might have been different....

When China's Ch'ing dynasty restoration after thirty years confronted Japan's Meiji restoration in warfare, the two protagonists were Li Hung-chang and one of Japan's founding fathers, Ito Hirobumi. They had first met in 1835 over the Korean question and agreed that Japan and

China should both stay out of Korea, where they were backing rival factions. Ito noted, however, "In about ten years, the wealth and strength of Japan will be admirable... a future source of trouble for China."

Sure enough, when the Japanese intervened in 1894, ostensibly to quell Korean rebels, they routed Li's North China army and in one of the first modern naval battles, off the Yalu River, sank or routed his fleet. It was commanded by an old cavalry general who brought his ships out line abreast like a cavalry charge, while the Japanese in two columns circled around them. Today when tourists visit the marble boat which stands in the summer palace lake outside Peking, they should be able to imagine a caption on it—"In memoriam: here lies what might have been the late Ch'ing navy."

In 1895 when Li was sent to Shimonoseki to sue for peace, he and Ito had a polite dialogue, which was recorded in English. Li said: "China and Japan are the closest neighbors and moreover have the same writing system. How can we be enemies?... We ought to establish perpetual peace and harmony between us, so that our Asiatic yellow race will not be encroached upon by the white race of Europe."

Ito said: "Ten years ago I talked with you about reform. Why is it that up to now not a single thing has been changed or reformed?"

Li could only reply, "Affairs in my country have been so confined by tradition that I could not accomplish what I desired... I am ashamed of having excessive wishes and lacking the power to fulfill them."

From our perspective today, the startling thing is that China's first modern war should have been left on the should-

ers of a provincial official as though it were simply a matter of his defending his share of the frontier. The Manchu dynasty has of course been blamed for its non-nationalistic ineptitude, but the trouble was deeper than the dynasty's being

non-Chinese; the fault evidently lay in the imperial monarchy itself, the superficiality of its administration, its constitutional inability to be a modern central government.

THE SEARCH FOR MODERN CHINA<sup>9</sup>

## WESTERN IMAGES OF CHINA

Until the middle of the eighteenth century, China generally received favorable attention in the West. In large part this stemmed from the wide dissemination of books and published correspondence by Catholics, especially the Jesuits, who saw in the huge population of China a potential harvest of souls for the Christian faith. Although mindful of some of China's problems, most Catholic observers followed the example of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, who had lived in China from 1583 to 1610 and admired the industry of China's population, the sophistication of the country's bureaucracy, the philosophical richness of its cultural traditions, and the strength of its rulers.

The French Jesuits, who dominated the China missions late in Kangxi's reign, presented an even more laudatory picture of the early Qing state, one deliberately designed to appeal to the "Sun King," Louis XIV, and to persuade him to back the missionaries with money and personnel. Central to these flattering presentations was the idea that the ethical content of the Confucian Classics proved the Chinese were a deeply moral nation and had once practiced a form of monotheism not so different from that found in the Judeo-Christian tradition. With a little effort, therefore, the Chinese could be brought back to the true values they had once espoused, and did not have to be forced to convert.

Although the Jesuits rapidly lost influence in China during the last years of Kangxi's reign, and declined in prestige in Europe during the eighteenth century until suppressed altogether in 1773, their books on Chinese government and society remained far the most detailed available. The German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibnitz read them and became deeply interested in the structure of the hexagrams in the *Book of Changes*. Even the antichristian philosopher Voltaire was intrigued by what he read about the Chinese. Since Voltaire was intent on attacking the power of the Catholic church in eighteenth-century France, he cleverly used the information about

China provided by the Catholics to disprove their more extreme claims. If, argued Voltaire, the Chinese really were so moral, intelligent, ethical, and well governed, and if this was largely attributable to the influence of Confucius, it followed that since Confucius had not been a Christian it was obviously possible for a country to get along admirably without the presence of Catholic clerical power.

In a series of influential works written between 1740 and 1760, Voltaire expounded his ideas about China. In one novel he presented his views on the parallelism of moral values in different societies, European and Asian. In a play he suggested that the innate moral strength of the Chinese had been able to calm even the Mongol conquerors led by Genghis Khan. And in an unusual historiographical gesture, Voltaire began his review of world history—*Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* ("An Essay on the Customs and Spirit of Nations")—with a lengthy section on China. He did this to emphasize the values of differing civilizations and to put European arrogance in perspective: "The great misunderstanding over Chinese rites sprang from our judging their practices in light of ours; for we carry the prejudices that spring from our contentious nature to the ends of the world." Unable to find a "philosopher-king" in Europe to exemplify his views of religion and government, Voltaire believed Emperor Qianlong would fill the gap, and he wrote poems in the distant emperor's honor.

Voltaire's praise for Chinese institutions appeared in a cultural context that was intensely sympathetic to China. During this same brief period in the mid-eighteenth century, Europe was swept by a fascination with China that is usually

described by the French word *chinoiserie*, an enthusiasm drawn more to Chinese decor and design than to philosophy and government. In prints and descriptions of Chinese houses and gardens, and in Chinese embroidered silks, rugs, and colorful porcelains, Europeans found an alternative to the geometrical precision of their neoclassical architecture and the weight of baroque design. French rococo was a part of this mood, which tended to favor pastel colors, asymmetry, a calculated disorder, a dreamy sensuality. Its popular manifestations could be found everywhere in Europe, from the "Chinese" designs on the new wallpaper and furnishings that graced middle-class homes to the pagodas in public parks, the sedan chairs in which people were carried through the streets, and the latticework that surrounded ornamental gardens.

Yet this cult of China, whether intellectual or aesthetic, faded swiftly as an-gry and sarcastic accounts like George Anson's became available. Voltaire's very enthusiasms made him the object of sarcasm or mockery as other great figures among the French Enlightenment philosophers began to find his picture of China unconvincing. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Baron de Montesquieu worried that the Chinese did not seem to enjoy true liberty, that their laws were based on fear rather than on reason, and that their elaborate educational system might lead to the corruption of Chinese morals rather than to their improvement. Other writers declared that China did not seem to be progressing, had indeed no notion of progress; from this it was but a short step to see the Chinese as, in fact, retrogressing. In the somber words of the French historian Nicolas Boulanger, written in 1763 and translated from the French

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the following year by the English radical John Wilkes:

All the remains of her ancient institutions, which China now possesses, will necessarily be lost; they will disappear in the future revolutions; as what she hath already lost of them vanished in former ones; and finally, as she acquires nothing new, she will always be on the losing side.

Reflecting on these arguments concerning China and the Chinese, some leading European thinkers labored to assess the country's prospects. One of these was the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith, who wrote on China in *The Wealth of Nations*, first published in 1776. In his analysis of the productive capacities of different countries, Smith found China useful for comparative purposes, especially with the nations of Europe and the developing societies of North America. Examining population growth as an index of development, he concluded that in Europe, where countries doubled their populations every five hundred years, growth was steady if undramatic. In North America, where the population doubled every twenty or twenty-five years, there was instant employment for the entire new work force; the New World was therefore "much more thriving, and advancing with much greater rapidity to the further acquisition of riches."

China, however, "long one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous countries in the world," had reached that stage in the cycle of growth where it had "acquired that full complement of riches which the nature of its laws and institutions permits it to acquire." In such a situation, continued population growth brought serious economic reper-

ussions: "If in such a country the wages of labour had ever been more than sufficient to maintain the labourer, and to enable him to bring up a family, the competition of the labourers and the interest of the masters would soon reduce them to this lowest rate which is consistent with common humanity." The result was that "the poverty of the lower ranks of people in China far surpasses that of the most beggary nations in Europe" and infatidic became an integral social practice. As Smith acidly phrased it: "Marriage is encouraged in China, not by the profitableness of children, but by the liberty of destroying them." China was exacerbating these problems, according to Smith, by refusing to consider change. By staying aloof from the growth of the world economy, China was sealing its fate: "A country which neglects or despises foreign commerce, and which admits the vessels of foreign nations into one or two of its ports only, cannot transact the same quantity of business which it might do with different laws and institutions."

In a famous series of lectures delivered by the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in the early 1820s, the various critical analyses explored by Boulanger, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Smith were synthesized in such a way that "Oriental Civilizations"—China pre-eminent among them—came to be seen as an early and now by-passed stage of history. The view of "Asiatic Society" synthesized by Hegel was to have a profound influence on the young Karl Marx and other later nineteenth-century thinkers. History, to Hegel, was the development of what he called the ideas and practices of freedom throughout the world. Freedom was the expression of the self-realization of the "World Spirit," and that spirit was reaching its fullest manifesta-

tions in the Christian states of Europe and North America. Optimistic about his own time, Hegel developed a theory that downplayed China's past. He described China as dominated by its emperors or despots, as typical of the "oriental nations" that saw only one man as free. In the West, the Greeks and Romans had come to see that some men were free; and centuries later, Hegel's generation had come to see that *all* humans were free. Lacking an understanding of the march of Spirit in the world, even the Chinese emperor's "freedom" was "caprice," expressed as either "ferocity—brutal recklessness of passion—or a mildness and tameness of the desires, which is itself only an accident of Nature."

Part of China's fate, Hegel wrote, turned on geographical factors: "The extensive tract of eastern Asia is severed from the general historical development." In a powerfully worded passage, Hegel explained that China had lacked the great boldness of the Europeans exploring the seas and instead had stayed tied to the agricultural rhythms of her great plains. The soil presented only "an infinite multitude of dependencies," whereas the sea carried people "beyond these limited circles of thought and action.... This stretching out of the sea beyond the limitations of the land, is wanting to the splendid political edifices of Asiatic States, although they themselves border on the sea—as for example, China. For them the sea is only the limit, the ceasing of the land; they have no positive relation to it." Though such a statement would have startled the wealthy ocean-going merchants of Fujian had they seen it, Hegel was basically correct that the Qing state itself was not interested in maritime exploration.

In a series of bleak conclusions, Hegel consigned the Chinese permanently to their space outside the development of the World Spirit. Although China had historians galore, they studied their country within their own limited preconceptions, not realizing that China itself lay "outside the World's History, as the mere presupposition of elements whose combination must be waited for to constitute their vital progress." Although Chinese emperors may speak words of "majesty and paternal kindness and tenderness to the people," the Chinese people "cherish the nearest opinion of themselves, and believe that men are born only to drag the car of Imperial Power." In a passage that moved beyond anything Lord Macartney had opined about the fate of the Qing dynasty, Hegel mourned for the Chinese people themselves: "The burden which presses them to the ground, seems to them to be their inevitable destiny; and it appears nothing terrible to them to sell themselves as slaves, and to eat the bitter bread of slavery."

Yet perhaps China was not caught forever in a metaphysical and geographical isolation. In one of his most ambiguous asides, Hegel added that "a relation to the rest of History could only exist in their case, through their being sought out, and their character investigated by others." The question of by whom or how that seeking out was to be done was left open by Hegel, but the Western powers, with their ships, their diplomatic missions, and their opium, were rapidly beginning to provide an answer....

#### FOREIGN PRESSURES AND MARX'S VIEWS

One of many factors that helped the Qing overthrow the Taiping was the

assistance of foreigners in the early 1860s, whether in the form of customs dues collected through the foreign-managed Shanghai Inspectorate of Customs or in the form of the Ever-Victorious Army, led in the field by Western officers. The reasons for that support had mainly to do with international affairs, in which, once again, the primary actors were the British. Disappointed at the results of the Nanjing treaty and frustrated by continued Qing intransigence, the British reached with scant sympathy when the Qing were threatened by the spread of the Taiping rebellion. Instead the British made the highly legalistic decision to apply the most-favored-nation clause to the American treaty of 1844, which had stipulated that that treaty be renegotiated in twelve years. By applying that renewal stipulation to their own Nanjing treaty of 1842, British authorities forced the Chinese to renegotiate in 1854.

The British foreign secretary saw the speciousness of this argument, writing to the governor of Hong Kong that "the Chinese Authorities may perhaps and with some degree of plausibility object that the circumstances of the time are unsuitable for the commencement of such a work. But he nevertheless suggested that the Qing be presented with the following formidable list of requests: access for the British to the entire interior of China or, failing that, to all of coastal Zhejiang and the lower Yangzi up to Nanjing; legalization of the opium trade; cancellation of internal transit dues on foreign imports; suppression of piracy; regulation of Chinese labor emigration; residence in Peking for a British ambassador; and reliance on the English version rather than the Chinese in all disputed interpretations of the revised treaty.

Despite some caution because of their involvement in the Crimean War against Russia, the British moved jointly with the Americans and French to press for treaty revision, which the beleaguered Qing continued to oppose. The British finally took advantage of an allegedly illegal Qing search of a ship formerly of Hong Kong registry, the *Arrow*, to recommence military actions at Canton in late 1856. After some delays in getting reinforcements—the Indian mutiny was now raging, and the idea of a war in east Asia was not popular with the British people—the British seized Canton in December 1857 and exited the consistently hostile governor-general of the region to Calcutta. Sailing north in a near repeat of the 1840 campaign, they took the strategic Dagu forts in May 1858 and threatened to seize Tianjin. In June, with the way to Peking now open to the British forces, the Qing capitulated and agreed to sign a new treaty. By the terms of the most-favored-nation clause, all British gains would also be shared by the other major foreign powers.

This "Treaty of Tianjin" of 1858 imposed extraordinarily strict terms on China. A British ambassador was henceforth to reside in Peking, accompanied by family and staff, and housed in a fitting residence. The open preaching of Christianity was protected. Travel anywhere inside China was permitted to those with valid passports, and within thirty miles of treaty ports without passports. Once the rebellions currently raging in China were suppressed, trade was to be allowed up the Yangzi as far as Hankou, and four new Yangzi treaty ports (Hankou, Jiujiang, Nanjing, and Zhenjiang) would be opened. An additional six treaty ports were to be opened immediately: one in Manchuria, one in Shandong, two on Tai-

wan, one in Guangdong, and one on Hainan Island in the far south.

The Tianjin treaty also stipulated that all further interior transit taxes on foreign imports be dropped upon payment of a flat fee of 2.5 percent. Standard weights and measures would be employed at all ports and customshouses. Official communications were to be in English. The character for *barbarian*... must no longer be used in Chinese documents describing the British. And British ships hunting pirates would be free to enter any Chinese port. A supplementary clause accompanying the various commercial agreements stated explicitly: "Opium will henceforth pay thirty taels per picul [approximately 130 pounds] Import Duty. The importer will sell it only at the port. It will be carried into the interior by Chinese only, and only as Chinese property; the foreign trader will not be allowed to accompany it." This condition was imposed despite the prohibition in the Chinese penal code on the sale and consumption of opium. Virtually the only British concession was to pull back from Tianjin and return the Dagu forts to Qing control.

The British evidently expected China's rulers to abandon the struggle at this point, but the Qing would not, and showed no intention of following the treaty clause that permitted foreign ambassadors to live in Peking. In June 1859, to enforce the new treaty terms, the British once more attacked the Dagu forts, now strengthened and reinforced by Qing troops. Fighting was heavy and the British were beaten back, even though the American naval commodore Josiah Tatnall, despite his country's declared neutrality, came to the aid of wounded British Admiral Hope with the ringing cry "Blood is thicker than water." Re-

pulsed from the Dagu forts, the British sent a team of negotiators to Peking by a different route in 1860, but they were arrested by the Qing and some were executed. Determined now to teach the Qing a lesson they could not ignore, Lord Elgin, Britain's chief treaty negotiator, ordered his troops to march on Peking. On October 18, 1860, following Elgin's orders, the British burnt to the ground the Yuan Ming Yuan—the exquisite summer palace in the Peking suburbs built for Qianlong's pleasure using the plans of Jesuit architects. The British, however, spared the Forbidden City palaces within Peking, calculating that destruction of those hal-lowed buildings would be a disgrace so profound that the Qing dynasty would inevitably fall.

The emperor had already fled the city for Manchuria and named his younger brother Prince Gong, to act as negotiator. But there was nothing left to negotiate, and on the very day the summer palace burned, Prince Gong reaffirmed the terms of the 1858 Tianjin treaty. In an additional "Convention of Peking," the emperor was stated to express his "deep regret" at the harassment of the British queen's representatives. He also promised a further 8 million taels in indemnity, permitted Chinese emigration on British ships, made Tianjin itself a treaty port, and ceded part of the mainland Kowloon peninsula to Hong Kong. Thus did the "treaty system" reach its fruition.

With these spectacular new gains firmly embedded in treaty form, and confident that Prince Gong would see to their enforcement, the British now swung to strong support for the Qing. The logic seemed clear: if the Qing beat back the Taipings, the foreigners would keep their new gains; if the Taipings



defeated the Qing, even under the semi-Westernized aegis of Hong Ren'gan, then the West would have to start the tiresome process of negotiation—and perhaps wage fresh wars—all over again. A sardonic observer of these international shifts was Karl Marx, who had been following the progress of the Taiping rebellion and of British foreign policy with great interest. Marx, born in 1818 in Germany, had written the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in 1848 with his friend Friedrich Engels. Expelled from both Germany and France for his radical views, he settled in London in 1849 and thereafter made England his home. By 1853, the revolutionary surge for which Marx had hoped in Europe had faded in the face of sustained opposition from reactionary government forces, and he turned to China to find reassurance for his belief that revolutionary change might still be possible.

That same year as the Taiping seized Nanjing, Marx wrote that he now believed all of China's various dissident forces were at last "gathered together in one formidable revolution." Although he could not tell what "religious, dynastic, or national shape" the Taiping would take, he was confident in ascribing the rise of the Taiping movement to the British opium trade, reinforced by British cannon. Together, these had ended China's self-imposed isolation, wrecked the myth of Manchu authority, and involved China's once venerated mandarins in a cycle of smuggling and corruption. The upshot could only be that Qing "dissolution must follow as surely as that of any mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin, whenever it is brought into contact with the open air."

The result of China's collapse would be spectacular, thought Marx, since the Western powers had become so strongly committed to the balance of their Chinese trade with Indian opium production, and the taxation of that trade to maintain their own domestic revenues, that they could not do without it. Accordingly, Marx wrote, "It may safely be argued that the Chinese revolution will throw the spark into the overloaded mine of the present industrial system and cause the explosion of the long-prepared general crisis, which, spreading abroad, will be closely followed by political revolutions on the continent." It was an apocalyptic vision of that dragging of China into the modern world that Hegel had speculated about thirty years before.

By the later 1850s, however, events in China had not had this kind of direct impact on European society. Still, Marx found his attention drawn to the new phase of British imperialism in China, which was represented by the "Arrow War" and the fighting that led first to the Treaty of Tianjin, and finally to the ratification of the Convention of Peking in 1860. He compared the British actions in bombarding Canton to the filibustering activities of "General" William Walker in California, Mexico, and Nicaragua, and wondered if it were possible that "the civilized nations of the world will approve this mode of invading a peaceful country, without previous declaration of war for an alleged infringement of the fanciful code of diplomatic etiquette." Marx was intrigued when Parliament censured Lord Palmerston in March 1857 for initiating the war, leading to a dissolution of Parliament, a general election, and what Marx saw as the end of "Palmerston's dictatorship."

When Palmerston was vindicated in the elections and England returned to the fray in China, Marx could only reiterate his sense of the injustice of the entire enterprise and the dangers that it implied for constitutional government. But Marx shrewdly added that the China trade was not going to expand as much as the ever-hopeful British merchants expected, because the Chinese could not possibly afford both large imports of opium and large imports of British manufacturers' goods. He observed too that the nation with the most to gain in the protracted Chinese negotiations was Russia. Despite setbacks in the Crimean War, Russia had now expanded its railway network into east Asia, was strengthening its hold over the coastline north of Korea, and had seized for itself immense areas of territory along the Amur River, where it had been excluded ever since the Treaties of Nerchinsk and Kiakhta, negotiated by Emperors Kangxi and Yongzheng.

Following up on ideas suggested by Hegel thirty years before, Marx divided world history into four stages of the "modes of production"—namely, "Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois." One might observe that the sequence of ancient-feudal-bourgeois has both chronological and analytical meaning in the European world. It provides, indeed, a way of summarizing the movement from Greco-Roman slave-owning empires, through the feudal epoch of medieval Europe, to the development of merchant guilds and municipal urban governments that spelled the start of bourgeois society. But the "Asiatic" mode is a geographical one; it lies outside the time sequence of the other three. And although Marx wrote that the four modes represented "progressive epochs in the economic formation of society," in reality

he followed Hegel in placing China (and India) outside the development of world history. Asiatic modes had in no way been subsumed into later development—they had merely limped on alongside them.

One of Marx's powerful formulations in the *Critique of Political Economy*, which he wrote in 1859, was this: "No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself." Marx might have followed Adam Smith in seeing China as having exhausted its "room" for fresh productive forces, but he was also suggesting that Westerners had the power to implant the seeds of "new, higher relations of production," since China had (as Marx wrote elsewhere) "a fossil form of social life." Thus, in a sense, the destructive march of foreign imperialism had a constructive effect: in weakening China's traditional structures, it would speed the day of successful proletarian revolution.

Here Marx's speculations on China stop. By 1862 he was growing weary and sarcastic about continuing news of Taiping horrors. Nor did he draw solace from the rapid rise of a completely new rebellion, that of the Nian, which had begun raging in north China well before the Taiping had been suppressed. As he and Engels had written so vividly in the *Communist Manifesto*: although "the 'dangerous class,' the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society," might be briefly swept up in revolutionary movements, it would inevitably revert to its logical role as the "tribed tool of reactionary intrigue." Yet one haunting

and powerful idea continued to hang over Marx's various writings on China. Sometime in the future, he reflected, as the reactionaries fled Europe in the face of an enraged proletariat, seeking shelter

in what they regarded as a last bastion of conservative power, they might find to their astonishment, written in bold letters upon the Great Wall, the words "Chinese Republic: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."

## POSTSCRIPT

### Were Confucian Values Responsible for China's Failure to Modernize?

China's failure to modernize in the last four decades of the nineteenth century was probably due to a combination of internal and external pressures. The tendency to gaze inward and to fear internal rebellion more than external aggression made China vulnerable to forces it did not yet understand. At the same time, the stagnation of its economy and the invasion of Western trade, especially the traffic in opium, corrupted China and opened the door to exploitative trade policies and even military intervention by the Western imperial powers. The Manchu dynasty, wanting above all to consolidate and maintain its power, failed to take into account the dangers that threatened it until it was too late.

Fairbank and Spence are among the best-known Western chroniclers of Chinese history. Fairbank's masterwork *China: A New History* (Harvard University Press, 1992) covers four millennia of Chinese history, and Spence's *God's Chinese Son* (W. W. Norton, 1996) recounts the bizarre story of Hong Xiuquan, leader of the Taiping uprising of 1845-1864. *Modernization and Revolution in China* (M. E. Sharpe, 1991) by June Grasso, Jay Corrin, and Michael Kort offers a readable survey of 4,000 years of Chinese history that is accessible to undergraduates and lay historians. Mary Clabaugh Wright's *Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism* (Stanford University Press, 1957) focuses on the T'ung-Chin Restoration of 1862-1874, which she considers the beginning of modern Chinese conservatism. For a positive analysis of the empress dowager, who some feel has been unfairly characterized as an iron-willed concubine who ruled through murder and intrigue, see Sterling Seagrave's strongly revisionist biography *Dragon Lady: The Life and Legend of the Last Empress of China* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1992). Students who wish to read something from Hegel should try *Rensou in History* translated by Robert S. Hartman (Bobbs-Merrill, Inc., 1953), and those wishing to explore Marx might enjoy *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* edited by Lewis S. Feuer (Doubleday, 1959). Any translation of the *Aynalacts* provides a good introduction to Confucius.

A final recommendation is Bernardo Bertolucci's Academy Award-winning film *The Last Emperor*, which begins with the death of the empress dowager and takes us inside the Forbidden City, the official residence of the emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties.