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CHINA'S LONG MARCH TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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**ORVILLE SCHELL AND JOHN DELURY**



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TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Orville Schell and  
John Delury

  
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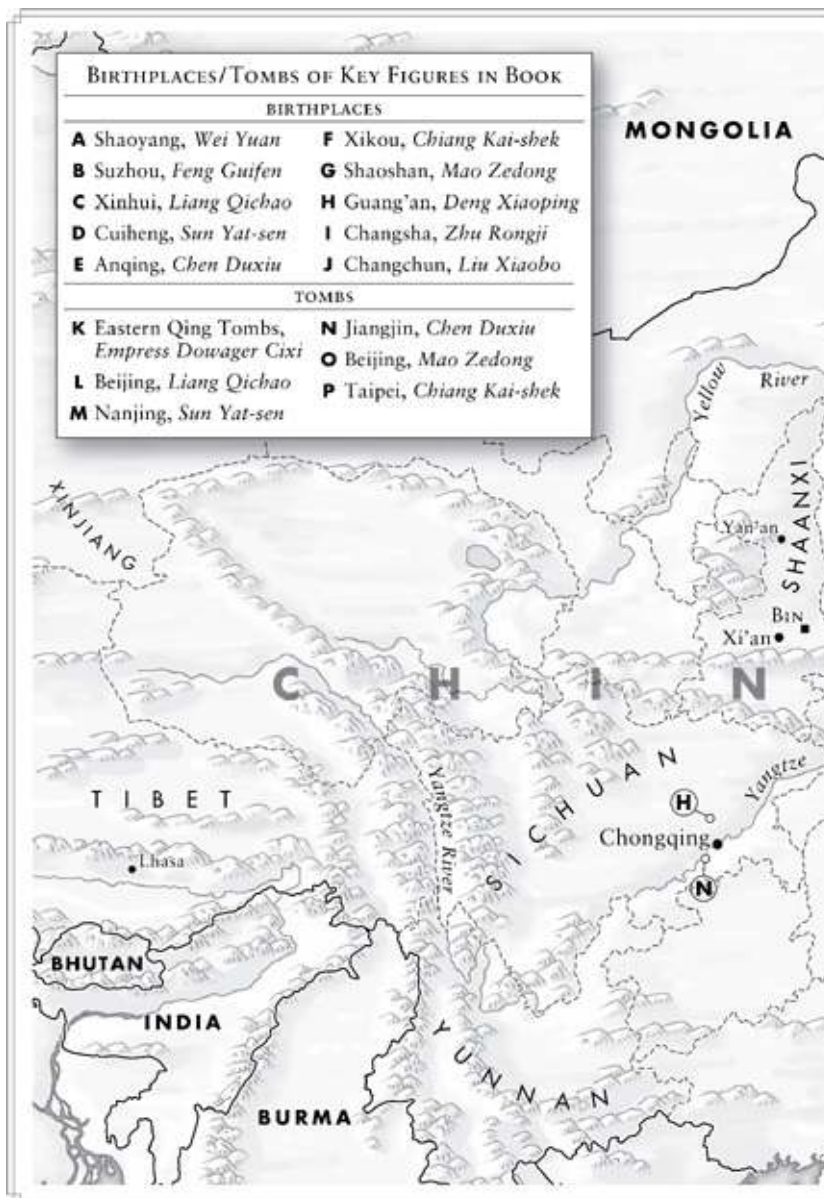
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## Introduction

### WEALTH AND POWER (富国强兵)

#### The Burden of Dreams

As the Chinese empire was unraveling at the beginning of the twentieth century under the combined pressures of internal decay and foreign assault, political essayist and reformer Liang Qichao began writing an unlikely novel, *The Future of New China*. Published serially in a popular journal, it was a strange blend of patriotic reverie and science fiction conjuring up what a rejuvenated China might look like sixty years hence—after it had reemerged as a strong, prosperous, and respected country once again. Although Liang, the most influential public intellectual of his generation, completed only a few chapters, his fictional exercise allowed his many readers, distraught by the Qing Dynasty's inability to adapt to modern times, to dream a little about what their benighted country might be like in an idealized future, circa 1962. As he imagined it then, the world's leading scholars, statesmen, and merchants would all clamor to visit and pay tribute both to China's modern present and its Confucian past at an international exposition to be held in Shanghai—strangely like the World Expo the city actually did hold in 2010. "I truly believe that this type of book can be a great help to China's future," Liang wrote.<sup>1</sup>

*The Future of New China* was not exactly great literature, and Liang admitted as much, commenting self-deprecatingly that the work-in-progress made him "laugh at myself."<sup>2</sup> By reading the novel's chapters today, when China is, in fact, ever more wealthy, powerful, and respected, imbues that long-ago moment with a triste sense of just how passionately Chinese then yearned to escape the bitter reality of their country's humiliating decline, even if only by projecting themselves for a moment into an imaginary future.

Such fantasies were an all too understandable antidote to China's century-long decline, and Liang was not the last to indulge in dreaming of remote triumphs. Four decades later, another well-known writer, Lin Yutang, contemplating a China largely occupied by the Japanese Imperial Army and steeped in even deeper misery, experienced a similar wishful prefiguration of the future. In his 1942 book *Between Tears and Laughter*, Lin described being visited by an "intuition," almost "mystic" in nature, which "blew like a whiff of clean air through the tortuous maze in which my will and my mind were imprisoned and paralyzed." He wrote defiantly how, even with backwardness and despair everywhere around him, he nonetheless "saw China growing strong." "I know that this nation of 450,000,000 people united and awakened and purged by the war-fire, is coming up," he insisted against all evidence. "The strength lies in her and nothing the western nations can do can stop her or keep her down."<sup>4</sup>

Such improbable dreams of a wealthy, strong, and proud China gave expression to widespread but frustrated yearnings for a revival of national greatness that arose in the

nineteenth century, when for the first time in centuries Chinese could no longer think automatically and indisputably of their empire as *Zhongguo* (中国), the “Central Kingdom.” Today, however, after three decades of dynamic economic growth on a scale and speed beyond anything the modern world has ever known, the fantasies of Liang Qichao and Lu Yutang seem prophetic.

Such a starkly unexpected ending to modern China’s torturous developmental story compels us to reexamine the narrative of endless modernization failure with which we have all grown up. How did China’s modern history of relentless humiliation and backwardness, failed reform and disastrous revolution—the curse of generation after generation of would-be activists trying to create a “new China”—suddenly morph into such a story of triumph? Was it really just a sudden post-Mao miracle conjured up by Deng Xiaoping, or were the seeds of the present planted long ago, only germinating so slowly that at the time it was difficult to see, or even imagine the shape of things to come ... except in a few fictional dreamscapes?

This is not another book heralding or bemoaning China’s rise. Instead, we have chosen to engage in what is more of a historical reflection on the backstory to China’s “economic miracle,” an attempt to use history to find a new vantage point on its progress, emphasizing the perspectives of the Chinese themselves. In short, our goal has been to embark on a somewhat different kind of explanation for how, after over a century of decline, occupation, civil war, state repression, and socialist revolution, China finally did manage to catapult itself into an era of stunning dynamism and economic growth. To do this, we have chosen to primarily rely not on new archival material, but instead on preexisting scholarship—both the older classics in the field and some more recent research—works in which both of us have been immersed over our many collective decades of studying China’s history. By standing on the shoulders of this collective body of work we hope to see a bit further toward the horizon of China’s future, so bound up as it is with China’s past. For it is these works that shaped, and continue to shape, our own thinking and understanding. And since both of us have also had long personal odysseys traveling, studying, living, and working in China, we have also drawn on some of these more immediate experiences that have also played an important role in helping us make sense out of how and why things have worked out as they have in this most singular of countries.

In reading through historical accounts of the lives, writings, and speeches of the diverse group of iconic political and intellectual figures presented in this book, a common chord rings through all their work—the abiding quest for *fuqiang* (富强), “wealth and power.” One account of modern China is thus the story of how these national leaders marched their people down the long road to *fluxing* (复兴), rejuvenation, and, by doing so, made Chinese society finally more ready than ever before for the possibility of a more open and democratic future.

The couplet of characters *fuqiang* has most commonly been translated as “wealth and power,” and as a result the term—a shorthand version of the ancient adage *fuguo qiangbing* (富国强兵), “enrich the state and strengthen its military power”—has thus worked its way into historical literature in the English language. The expression was coined during the Warring States Period more than two millennia ago, as when the Legalist philosopher Han Fei explained bluntly, “If a wise ruler masters wealth and power, he can have whatever he desires.”<sup>5</sup> For Chinese reformers since the early nineteenth century, these two characters have repeatedly stood in for the profound desire among China’s cognoscenti to see the



country restored to the kind of greatness their ancestors had once taken for granted. Above all, these patriotic Chinese yearned for their nation to be able to defend itself against foreign incursion. Although in classical times these two characters conveyed a certain sense of aggressiveness, when the phrase was revived in the nineteenth century in a context of an empire in decline and struggling to maintain its territorial integrity, the subtext of “wealth and power” was self-defense rather than foreign conquest. A more fitting translation might actually have been: “prosperity and strength.”

As China’s humiliation deepened through each defeat by imperialist powers from the First Opium War (1839–42) onward, the scramble to find the keys to China’s lost “wealth and power” gained an almost unbearable urgency. The ardor with which successive generations of Chinese intellectual and political leaders pursued *fuqiang*—even though most of them ended up with very little to show for their efforts—ultimately proved a unique dynamo fueling the country’s constant and fervent pursuit of self-reinvention and rejuvenation.

The obverse of the elusive dream of “wealth and power” was, of course, China’s chronic reality of poverty, weakness, and ignominy. As the West and Japan encroached ever more on its territorial sovereignty and as its people began to lose confidence in the superiority of the Confucian system itself, first uncertainty, and finally debilitating doubt and self-disparagement infected the entire society. When China was defeated by Japan—a presumably inferior Asian power—in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, the shock was staggering. By the end of World War I, the notion of their country as a global victim had become an organic part of how Chinese looked at themselves and their place in the world, with variations on the theme of “humiliation” infecting every aspect of China’s cultural, psychological, and political being. Confronting this narrative of prey versus predators, in which they were inevitably bested, Chinese reformers and leaders wrestled with the complex task of blaming the predatory great powers, while at the same time somehow absolving their own countrymen of too crippling a sense of inferiority and hopelessness. Myriad new slogans arose, and many have endured to this day, all emanating from a crushing sense of China’s having fallen from its previous state of grace: “Restore the nation and erase the stain of humiliation!” “Endure humiliation to carry out our important task!”<sup>6</sup> By the 1940s, Chinese were speaking regularly of “a century of humiliation” and had even established a National Humiliation Day. To this day, children are still exhorted to “never forget national humiliation and strengthen our national defense.”<sup>7</sup>

Modern Chinese intellectuals have continuously woven these grievances together into an ever more elaborate tapestry in which a weakened China is depicted as being unfairly pitted against a powerful, aggressive imperialist world. Within this frieze of history, our book examines how foreign exploitation and the ensuing humiliation that flowed from it became a deeply seductive, if painful, way of understanding their country’s inescapable failures, how these failures also became organic parts of a new national identity (marked by what one scholar has described as the “sanctification of victimhood”),<sup>8</sup> and finally how the paradoxically provided raw material for escaping the dilemma of perpetually being both stepped on and one step behind the great powers of the world. Foreign superiority may have been humiliating and shameful, but it also served as a sharp goad urging Chinese to sacrifice for all the various reform movements and revolutions that came to be launched as a way to remove the stigma of their shame. And nationalism, which reformers and revolutionaries

alike turned to as a way to galvanize the populace against their ignominy, grew directly out of China's evolving consciousness of failure and weakness, its roots well irrigated by the aquifer of historical humiliation that had long been pooling beneath it.

In the nineteenth century, the effort to efface national humiliation and restore China to wealth, strength, and respect had been largely focused on the question of how the West's military technology and economic *yong* (用), "techniques," might be harnessed to China's own national *zhiqiang* (自强), "self-strengthening" effort. By the early twentieth century, however, the need for more far-reaching and radical approaches had become painfully apparent. It was in this period that Chinese thinkers first began seriously questioning the wisdom of maintaining the inner *ti* (体), or "core," of the country's traditional culture, fearing that China's backwardness and inability to adapt to the modern world was rooted in Confucian values themselves. Fin de siècle public intellectuals such as Liang Qichao and Yan Fu, for example, were ready to jettison the foundations of Chinese culture and import Western ideas in their place as part of a desperate effort to restore their country to greatness. "We have no time to ask whether this knowledge is Chinese or Western, whether it is old or new," Yan wrote imploringly. "If one course leads to ignorance and thus to poverty and weakness ... we must cast it aside. If another course is effective in overcoming ignorance and thus leads to the cure of our poverty and weakness, we must imitate it, even if it proceeds from barbarians."<sup>9</sup>

Soon thereafter, even more radical skeptics had launched a cultural and intellectual uprising known as the New Culture Movement, calling for a wholesale repudiation of China's past and a new regimen of even more extensive foreign borrowing. For these activists around whom much of twentieth-century Chinese history turned, the demolition of the country's ancient Confucian escutcheon became part of a sacred mission to "save the nation."

Unlike democratic political reform in the West, which developed out of a belief in certain universal values and human rights as derived from a "natural," if not God-given, source, and so were to be espoused regardless of their efficacy, the dominant tradition of reform in China evolved from a far more utilitarian source. Its primary focus was to return China to a position of strength, and any way that might help achieve this goal was thus worth considering. What "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" meant to the French Revolution and to the making of modernity in the West, "wealth, strength, and honor" have meant to the forging of modern China. As a result, Chinese reformers tended to inhabit what looks to Western eyes like a pragmatic kingdom of means, rather than an idealistic world of ends. Reformers have been interested in democratic governance at various stages in China's tortuous path, not so much because it might enshrine sacred, inalienable political liberties but because it might make their nation more dynamic and thus stronger. "We cannot decide whether an idea is good or not without seeing it in practice" was the way Sun Yat-sen, "Father of the Nation" who helped bring republican government to China, once pragmatically observed. "If the idea is of practical value to us and to the world, it is good. If the idea is impractical, it is not good."<sup>10</sup>

By this logic, since the liberal political philosophies and governmental systems of the West had been so effective in creating such extraordinary national strength, would it not be foolish of Chinese reformers not to also experiment with them? But the same held true for communism, fascism, and authoritarianism. If one kind of "borrowing" did not do the job, the inclination was to try another, and another ... until China could find a formula that worked.

So in their relentless quest for wealth, strength, and finally greatness, successive generations of reformers bent their energies toward giving their country the equivalent of serious economic, intellectual, cultural, and political organ transplants.

Initially, conservative and sometimes xenophobic factions obstructed and inhibited the process, but over time, the scope of what might be acceptably imported from abroad kept growing. However, whatever means of borrowing were chosen, the goal was almost always the same: the “salvation” of the nation and its restoration to global preeminence. It was the pragmatic willingness to try anything that has given the drama of modern Chinese history its strangely disjointed quality, as if each succeeding act of borrowing had been imagined and written by a different playwright.

Alas, learning from foreign models turned out to have its own set of problems, for to borrow from elsewhere in such a wholesale way meant to deny the most organic aspect of being Chinese, namely, its own unique cultural tradition extending back thousands of years. Indeed, for more than a century and a half, the country found itself oscillating between attraction to and then repulsion from a culture that had for millennia served it well, yet now seemed the very cause of its weakness and failure. Finally, under Mao Zedong the project of destroying the old core of Chinese identity was carried to a grim conclusion with a violent and totalistic resolve. But, like a forest fire that clears the way for new growth, it may have ironically also helped prepare the way to usher in a spectacular new kind of economic growth under his successor, Deng Xiaoping.

As modern China’s political history unfolded over the past century and a half, the country’s successive efforts at self-reinvention kept crashing onto its shores like ever more powerful and destructive waves. To make sense of the unremitting upheaval that ensued, we have gathered together a dramatis personae of eleven iconic intellectuals and leaders, reformers and revolutionaries, to serve as guides. They span the years from the early nineteenth century until the present day, and all played critical roles as thinkers, iconoclasts, and leaders in this modern drama. We hope this cast of characters will not only help personalize what can otherwise appear as an opaque and bewildering sweep of alien history but also help tease out some of the leitmotifs that have kept repeating from generation to generation and thus, when understood, impart a sense of shape and coherence to the narrative of one of the world’s most critical countries as it continues its difficult progress into modernity.

## Humiliation (行己有耻)

WEI YUAN (魏源)

### The Temple

There is little tranquility to be found around the Temple of the Tranquil Seas, which sits on a narrow cut of land in the northwest corner of the city of Nanjing, squeezed between the banks of the Yangtze River and Lion Rock. Cars and trucks roar by on a three-lane boulevard leading toward downtown through a gate in the city's massive fourteenth-century fortification. A kind of metropolitan Great Wall built by the founder of the Ming Dynasty for his new capital, this rampart still rings the modern city, rising behind the steep crest of Lion Rock, where long ago Ming imperial officials planned to erect a giant tower from which visitors could be awed by majestic views of the great river to the north and the capital spread out to the south. Alas, dynastic coffers ran dry before this imperial project could be built, and it was not until six hundred years later—in September 2001—that the tower was finally completed.

At the foot of Lion Rock, nestled inside the Temple of the Tranquil Seas itself, is a small shrine to a seminal moment in modern Chinese history. It was in a back room of this temple that, in the oppressive heat of August 1842, Chinese negotiators were forced to sit with their British counterparts and hammer out the crushing terms of the Treaty of Nanjing. This bitterly humiliating document ended the three-year-old Opium War, China's first major clash with the West and the start of an interminable series of military and diplomatic defeats at the hands of imperialist powers.



Statue of Wei Yuan at Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou ([photo credit 2.1](#))

The negotiating chamber in the temple has been restored to something resembling its original state, with another building across the small courtyard housing an exhibition on the painful history of what have come to be known as “China’s Unequal Treaties.” Back when the inaugural treaty was signed aboard the British warship HMS *Cornwallis*, anchored in the Yangtze not far from the temple, Chinese officials hoped it would be an “eternal document of confidence and trust.”<sup>1</sup> Making unpleasant but unavoidable concessions, China’s ruling Qing Dynasty justified the treaty as an artful ploy to placate the aggressive foreigners and, by getting rid of them, restore a state of equilibrium in which Beijing would regain its role presiding over the center of the world, as Chinese then knew it.

Today the Temple of the Tranquil Seas is a curious porthole into this past. As the exhibition’s first panel explains: “Those unequal treaties were like fettering ropes of humiliation that made China lose the control of her political and military affairs ... and seriously hindered and destroyed the social and economic development of China. It was one of the major causes that rendered China to be poor and weak in modern history.” The explanatory panel adds that because the Temple of the Tranquil Seas was “the former site of negotiating the Treaty of Nanjing, the first unequal treaty of modern China, [it] has become a symbol of the commencement of China’s modern history.”

So here is where we open our retelling of that history, in the place that Chinese conventionally view as the starting point of their agonizing voyage into modernity, but also as the beginning of the country’s long and painful road back to wealth and power. As the

officially authorized birthplace of an important aspect of modern Chinese identity, the temple is a curiously vivid representation of the country's sense of its history of backwardness and impotence. It may seem strange to Westerners, accustomed to the histories of modern nations beginning with moments of triumph—the Glorious Revolution in Britain, the storming of the Bastille in France, or the signing of the American Declaration of Independence—to find the Chinese beginning their modern journey by highlighting the shock of unexpected defeat and a moment symbolizing greatness lost. Yet that defeat, that moment of loss, resentment, and humiliation, would end up becoming a strangely affirmative one. Being overwhelmed by a materially stronger but culturally inferior foreign power—what Chinese leaders pejoratively referred to as *yi* (夷), “barbarians,” became a counterintuitive source of motivation for China's regeneration as a great power. Humiliation was to become transmuted into a *positive* force—transformed from a depressant into a stimulant—in the construction of a new and modern national identity. The shameful sense of living in paradise lost, of having fallen so far behind other countries, would become a curious badge of distinction, one that would goad the country to strengthen and develop in order to finally catch up with the West and thus once again be able to defend itself and restore China to honor.

Since this drama has continued into the present, it is not surprising to find that the large panel in the temple's exhibit room makes modern Chinese history into a heroic morality play.

It is hard to look back upon this humiliating history. The unequal treaties are like acts in a historical tragedy, telling sorrowfully of the misfortunes, grief and humiliation of the Chinese people. But the abolishment of the unequal treaties has shown the Chinese people's unwavering spirit of struggle for independence and self-strengthening. To feel shame is to approach courage. With history serving as a warning, our goal is to promote the great cause of our people's rejuvenation!

According to this canonical version of modern Chinese history, 1842 is year one. Even high school student preparing to take the intensely competitive and dreaded college entrance examination is now required to memorize the official national narrative that divides Chinese history neatly into pre–Opium War and post–Opium War periods. There is some truth to this historical division. After all, the Opium War did play a critical role in drawing a line between the past and future, as well as in stimulating new ideas about China's place in the world and how the country would have to change in order to survive.

However, to understand the origins of the “humiliating history” that lies at the root of modern China's historical experience, as well as its self-consciousness and evolving national self-image, it is necessary to back up a bit. The recognition that something was deeply wrong had already begun to incubate within China decades *prior* to the shocking defeat by the British in the First Opium War. However, because Chinese historically had had so little experience questioning the fundamental assumptions of their culture and its ways of governance, recognition came grudgingly slowly.

The key figure who first sensed that his country was in decline, and then initiated its search for modern *fluxing* (复兴), “rejuvenation,” was a scholar-official by the name of Wei Yuan. He was among the first to confront his countrymen with a new reality: that they were falling perilously behind the seafaring powers of the modern West. Calling for a revival of an indigenous but long-ignored tradition of “statecraft reform” to fortify themselves, Wei boldly

exhorted his countrymen to engage in strategic borrowing from Western powers such as England, whose ships, powered by steam and armed with the latest cannons, had wreaked havoc along China's coasts and up her riverways, into the heart of the empire.

Although an ethnic Han Chinese, Wei was intensely proud of the originally Manchu Qing Empire's eighteenth-century greatness and distraught by its early nineteenth-century decline. He left a lasting mark on modern China's intellectual and political agenda by sounding a warning alarm. In the process, he gave a name to the primary goal of China's elite: a restoration of the nation's *fuqiang* (富强), or "wealth and power," a phrase coined two thousand years earlier than he reprised and which has remained something of a north star for Chinese intellectual and political leaders ever since.

## Apogee of Empire

The son of a middle-ranking Qing official, Wei Yuan was born in 1794 in Shaoyang, Hunan Province, near the town where Mao Zedong would be born a century later.<sup>2</sup> The 1790s turned out to be the political, economic, and military high-water mark for the Qing Dynasty. At least on the surface, China still seemed to be—as a literal translation of its name, *Zhongguo* (中国), indicated—the "Central Kingdom." Indeed, Qing China was enjoying what was referred to as *shengshi* (盛世), an "age of prosperity and flourishing."<sup>3</sup> The population had doubled since the time of the Ming Dynasty, surpassing three hundred million, making it not only the most populous empire on the globe, but also a country in which many people lived as well as, if not better than, those anywhere else. As Ken Pomeranz's work has shown, per capita standards of living in China's wealthiest region, the lower Yangtze River delta, rivaled those in Britain and the Netherlands, then the wealthiest parts of Europe, which increasingly craved Chinese tea, porcelain, and silk. And the Qing economy was an important engine driving economic globalization, such as it was, in the preindustrial world.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of territory, China was a behemoth. The Qing Dynasty, founded by Manchu tribes who swept down from the Manchurian forests north of the Great Wall in 1644 to capture Beijing, had more than doubled the size of the preceding Ming Empire. By the late eighteenth century, the Qing military was capable of projecting power up into the Himalayas as far as the Tibetan capital, Lhasa (where Chinese troops fought off a Nepalese Gurkha assault in 1792), and down the banks of the Red River to Hanoi (where Qing forces restored the deposed emperor of Vietnam, albeit only temporarily, in 1788). The political stability of the empire had been ensured by the longevity of the Qing emperor Qianlong, who had reigned in glory for six decades.<sup>5</sup>

It was at this apex of power that, just months before Wei Yuan was born, Emperor Qianlong had deigned to receive Lord George Macartney, an emissary from Britain, in what would be a defining moment in Sino-Western relations. King George III had dispatched Macartney to sail to Beijing at the head of an embassy of ninety-five men, carrying the latest in European technology and artwork as gifts. His official purpose was to seek "normal" diplomatic relations between Britain and the Celestial Kingdom based on an exchange of resident ambassadors. But Macartney's even more pressing charge was to seek a significant improvement in trade relations. Rather like twenty-first-century America, eighteenth-century Britain, for all its military and economic might, had been running an unsustainable trade

deficit with China, because there was no British export that Chinese consumers would buy in amounts comparable to British imports of tea, for which Britons had an insatiable desire.

When Macartney's much-anticipated audience with the Chinese monarch finally took place, Emperor Qianlong dismissively informed him that the Qing Empire had no great need for England's goods or inventions, and, in any event, it was not accustomed to establishing "equal" diplomatic relations with anyone. "How can our dynasty alter its whole procedure and regulations, established for more than a century, in order to meet your individual views?" Qianlong incredulously demanded in an edict addressed to King George for Macartney to carry home with him. "As your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures."<sup>6</sup> Emperor Qianlong's rhetoric reeked of complacency, but, coming from the ruler of a vast and powerful empire, it was also a perfectly rational assessment of the balance of power between China and the West at that moment.

Macartney proved no less smug. Presciently smelling the rot that was already starting to undermine the foundations of the Chinese empire's proud political edifice, he wrote in his diary, "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 neighbours 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."<sup>7</sup>

As Macartney sensed, China's "age of prosperity and flourishing" was already drawing quickly to a close. Demographic pressures, ecological constraints, political corruption, and cultural ossification were conspiring to undo the great Qing Empire. Decades of population growth, intensified agriculture, and land reclamation were now beginning to reap a bitter ecological harvest of eroded soil, fallow fields, droughts, and floods, all of which made it ever more difficult for farmers to feed their families. An energetic government might have maintained popular support in the face of such adversity. Unfortunately for the Qing, official corruption had also become endemic, causing average Chinese to view their government as part of the problem, not the solution.<sup>8</sup>

A telltale sign of decline appeared in the year of Wei's birth: the eruption of a large-scale rebellion of disgruntled peasants that took the dynasty nearly a decade to suppress. This so-called White Lotus Rebellion turned out to be just the first in a series of domestic insurrections, sectarian revolts, and civil wars that would plague China until Mao's victory in 1949. Again, Lord Macartney proved prophetic: "I am indeed very much mistaken if all the authority and all the address of the Tartar [Manchu] Government will be able much longer to stifle the energies of their Chinese subjects," wrote the British emissary. "Scarcely a year now passes without an insurrection in some of the provinces. It is true they are usually suppressed, but their frequency is a strong symptom of the fever within. The paroxysm is repelled, but the disease is not cured."<sup>9</sup> Fear of rebellion would continue to haunt every ruler in Beijing through to modern times, even the likes of Deng Xiaoping and his successors, who have all had an abiding aversion to any kind of social or political uprising that might upset stability.



## Return to Statecraft

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This was the world of declining fortunes in which Wei Yuan came of age. At nineteen, he won a coveted fellowship to go to Beijing as one of Hunan Province's most promising talents. Leaving behind his new bride, he went to study with the leading lights of the intelligentsia in the capital. This was still a rather claustrophobic world in which students and teachers devoted themselves to mastering the canon of ancient Confucian texts in order to advance through the civil service examination system. The examinations, held at the county, provincial, and national levels, provided the only legitimate avenue to becoming an official in the prestigious imperial bureaucracy. Although even the lowest county degree brought a measure of prestige and privilege, it was only by passing the triennial national examination and acquiring the degree of a *jinshi* (进士), or "presented scholar," that an ambitious student such as Wei could hope to be appointed to high office. For men of ambition in nineteenth-century China, passing the imperial exams was the be-all and end-all of one's existence.

Once in Beijing, as he crammed for the examinations, Wei gravitated toward relatively unconventional thinkers, including Liu Fenglu, a forgotten figure today, but then one of the empire's leading philosophers. Liu inducted his bright acolyte into an esoteric school of Confucianism that claimed to unlock secret teachings of the Sage through unorthodox readings of classical texts. His ideas were an exciting alternative to the rote memorization otherwise required to do well on the exams. Perhaps Liu's most radical contention was that history did not move in endless "dynastic cycles," as educated Chinese almost universally assumed to be the case, but rather progressed in a linear, teleological fashion, from an ancient era of Chaos toward a utopian future called *datong* (大同), "Grand Harmony." Confucius himself, Liu held, had lived in an imperfect in-between period of Approaching Peace, and taught a secret set of pragmatic, realpolitik methods to keep the world orderly until the era of Grand Harmony arrived. Liu believed that China was precisely in this transitional phase between Chaos and Grand Harmony, and soon Wei Yuan would apply this pragmatic and liberating form of Confucianism in bold new ways.<sup>10</sup>

In 1822 Wei passed the province-level civil service examination with the second-highest mark in his pool.<sup>11</sup> He was now a member of China's national elite, qualified to take the highest examination, which was offered in Beijing. But Wei would have to wait more than twenty years before finally attaining that coveted highest degree and ironically his failure was probably the reason for his lasting historical significance. As an unsuccessful and frustrated examination candidate, he was paradoxically freed to become an independent and original thinker.

Wei was thrust into the role of reformist in the early 1820s, when he took charge of a writing project that would prove far more influential for China's future than anything he might have done as an official. The finance commissioner of wealthy Jiangsu Province recruited him to compile a collection of writings on government administration, economic policy, and social order. Wei's *An Anthology of Statecraft Writings from the Present Dynasty*, published in 1826, exerted a profound impact on fellow scholars and officials, who were beginning to worry about what was wrong with their once "prosperous and flourishing" empire. The term for "statecraft," or *jingshi* (经世), literally meant "ordering the world," and Chinese scholars of this more pragmatic, political bent used it to distinguish themselves from fellow Confucians who were more interested in ethical self-cultivation, metaphysics,

philosophy, or classicist scholasticism. In the spirit of this unique form of statecraft, Wei's anthology was designed to be both a practical field guide for government officials and a compendium of theories on political and economic reform. By using the old motto of "wealth and power" and making its revival the overarching goal of his reform agenda, Wei's book laid new conceptual foundations for China's future struggle to modernize.<sup>12</sup>

On the face of it, all of the works chosen by Wei for inclusion in his anthology were composed by Confucian scholar-officials, who ostensibly hewed to an orthodox emphasis on family before state, moral values over material interests, and governance by means of ritual and education rather than reward and punishment. When they were read collectively, however, the message of these essays was deeply subversive to that very moralistic Confucian orthodoxy. Wei's anthology included one policy proposal after another written by hard-nosed scholar-officials who sought new, practical ways to strengthen the empire politically, economically, and militarily. Indeed, at its core, Wei's statecraft reform agenda turned out to be based less on the moral values preached by Confucians than on the precepts of the Sage's ancient rivals—a group known as the Legalists who emphasized wealth and power as primary goals.

The first Legalist statesmen emerged as critics of Confucius, who lived circa 500 BC and preached a moral code focused on filial piety to one's ancestors and loyalty to one's ruler. Known in Chinese as *rujia* (儒家), the "School of Scholars," Confucius and his disciples insisted that the virtues of benevolence, ritual propriety, and social harmony were the only legitimate and effective basis for good government. In a famous debate against Legalists, Confucius openly decried their fixation on "wealth and power," arguing that "propriety and righteousness are the foundations of the state, while power and profit are the destroyers of government."<sup>13</sup>

At the other extreme of the political and philosophical spectrum in traditional Chinese thinking was the rival *fajia* (法家), "School of Legalists," who rejected the Confucian ideal of government by virtuous scholars ruling over a peaceful and harmonious agrarian society. Instead, they defined the proper goals of the ruler and his officials in one simple exhortatory phrase: *fuguo qiangbing* (富国强兵), "Enrich the state and strengthen its military power." One of the originators of this new creed was the fourth-century BC statesman Shang Yang, a brilliant consigliere who, though he had a "cruel nature," dedicated his energies to "enriching the state and strengthening the army" of the kingdom of Qin.<sup>14</sup> If Shang Yang was Legalism's first great practitioner, its greatest theoretician was Han Feizi, who lived at the close of a bloody phase of Chinese antiquity known as the Warring States Period. Han Feizi's teachings inspired the unapologetically amoral first emperor of the Qin Dynasty, who ended the era of Warring States by violently unifying China in 221 BC. The core of Han Feizi's philosophy boiled down to a single dictum: "If a wise ruler masters wealth and power, he can have whatever he desires."<sup>15</sup> And Han Feizi dispensed Machiavellian advice in the dark arts of politics to ensure that "in times of peace the state is rich, and in times of trouble its armies are strong."<sup>16</sup>

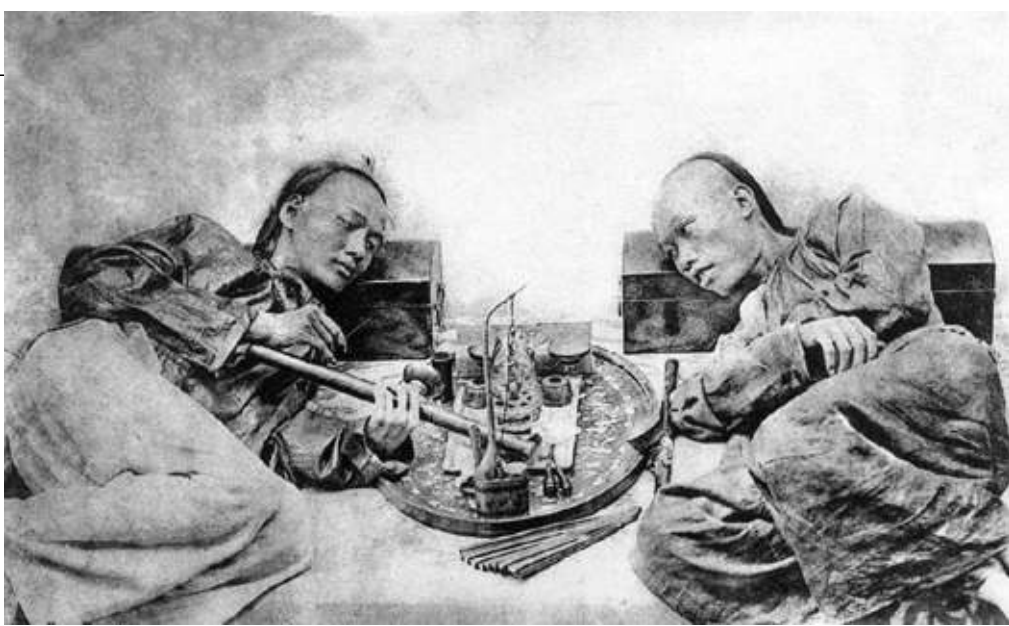
Legalists offered a radical alternative to the Confucian notion of harmonious agrarian idealism. They argued instead that the key to national strength was to invest in technologically advanced military, encourage commerce through a mixture of private enterprise and state monopoly over key industries, and maintain social order through a brutal set of laws enforced uniformly by an authoritarian state. (Their list of priorities and

principles bears a sometimes uncanny resemblance to today's "China model" of authoritarian state-led capitalism.) They were pessimistic about human nature, and viewed men as acting out of base motives such as fear and desire rather than loyalty and benevolence. This meant that the ruler's job was to impose a strict system of clear rewards and punishments, allowing no exceptions. Legalism was egalitarian in that all stood equal before the law, and, true to their name, Legalists prized *fazhi* (法治), the "rule of law," rather than the Confucians' political philosophy of *dezhi* (德治), the "rule of virtue." But according to the Legalists, rulers must use carrots and sticks to ensure that their subjects did their bidding, fashioning the common interest out of countless individual selfish impulses and deeds, thereby maintaining their own power in the process. These ancient Chinese *realpolitik*ers had no patience for what they considered the moralistic blather of the Confucians. Since they put little stock in good intentions, wealth and strength alone were the ultimate arbiters of a ruler's success or failure.

The remarkable thing about Wei Yuan's anthology was that it brought these very un-Confucian ideas back into the mainstream of nineteenth-century reform thinking. By threading the language and values of Legalism throughout a guidebook for Confucian scholar-officials,



Emperor Qianlong receives Lord Macartney, 1793 ([photo credit 2.2](#))



Opium smokers in nineteenth-century China (photo credit 2.3)



British ironclad warship HMS *Nemesis* during the First Opium War, 1841 (photo credit 2.4)



Signing the Treaty of Nanjing aboard the HMS *Cornwallis*, 1842 (photo credit 2.5)

Wei launched a covert revolution from within. Of course, *An Anthology of Statecraft Writings* did not attack or question Confucianism directly. Wei was far too much of a Confucian himself to be so direct. Rather, he replaced the moralist idealism of what Confucians called *wangdao* (王道), the “Kingly Way,” with a pragmatic, utilitarian focus on “wealth and power”—the almost obsessive preoccupation of Legalism. After all, according to Wei, even the most virtuous “sage king” must ensure that his people are prosperous and the state strong. “From ancient times,” he wrote, “there have been wealth and power that were exercised apart from the Kingly Way, but never the Kingly Way exercised apart from wealth and power.”<sup>17</sup> Even in the days of Confucius, he insisted, guns and butter were the keys to governance. “A sufficiency of food and a sufficiency of military power served as tools for governing the empire,” he wrote. “Were not Confucius and his disciples concerned with providing for the people’s material welfare and managing the state’s revenue?”<sup>18</sup> In other words, even Confucian philosopher-kings had to ensure that their people were prosperous and the state was strong; more relevant to Wei’s own day was that even flawed rulers could hope to achieve “wealth and power.”

## Opium War and Humiliating Peace

*An Anthology of Statecraft Writings* established Wei’s reputation as the leading political reformer of his generation, but his promising career in government hit the bamboo ceiling as he repeatedly failed the national level of the civil service examination system, rendering him ineligible for the highest levels of government appointment. Instead he had to work as a political advisor to provincial officials, throwing himself into issues such as reforming the salt and grain transport trade, a formerly profitable state monopoly now plagued by high costs and corruption. Wei put his money where his mouth was, making a small fortune investing with the private salt transporters along the way. With his newfound wealth, he bought a villa in the Yangtze Delta city, Yangzhou, in 1834 and gave up on trying to pass the national exam.<sup>19</sup>

Then came the Opium War. Wei watched the stunning events unfold from the safety of his Yangzhou villa, playing only minor and intermittent roles in the conflict. He did, however,

become overtly linked to some of its principal actors, and wrote a narrative of the war, *Account of the Daoguang-Era Pacification Campaign Against the Western Ships*. The central message of his account was that China urgently needed reform, including borrowing from abroad, in order to protect and restore the empire's greatness. It was a message that would inspire and divide the political class for generations to come.<sup>20</sup>

Wei's telling of the war centered on the heroic role of China's first drug czar, Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu, whom Emperor Daoguang had dispatched to Canton in early 1839 with a mandate to ban opium use and stop British traders from aggressively marketing the drug to an alarmingly growing number of addicts in China. Back in the "age of prosperity and flourishing," opium use had been limited, while England's addiction to tea had caused an annual trade deficit to run in China's favor. However, since the 1820s British traders had stumbled upon a clever, if hurtful, way to stanch the hemorrhaging of British silver bullion in Canton, the only Chinese port into which Europeans were then allowed to bring their goods. By selling high-grade opium grown in British India to Chinese middlemen, Britain's chronic trade deficit with China was turned into a growing surplus. These traders, many linked to the government-backed East India Company, were the drug cartels of their day. The opium trade became so successful that the British Parliament soon found itself under heavy pressure to expand market access beyond Canton—by force if necessary. In the meantime, Qing rulers now faced a fiscal crisis themselves, with silver bullion suddenly flowing out of rather than into the Chinese economy. In addition, Emperor Daoguang was understandably dismayed by the toll opium addiction was taking on his subjects. And so it was that China and Britain came to loggerheads in one of the modern world's first drug wars.<sup>21</sup>

China's one triumph in the confrontation came before war even broke out thanks to Commissioner Lin. His first act upon arrival in Canton was to cordon off the area where the British traders were confined, along with their warehouses of opium. Lin then brazenly commanded them to hand over twenty thousand chests of the narcotic. Wei Yuan vividly described the scene that followed: "At an elevated spot on the shore, a space was barricaded in; here a pit was dug, and filled with opium mixed with brine: into this, again, lime was thrown, forming a scalding furnace, which made a kind of boiling soup of the opium. In the evening the mixture was let out by sluices, and allowed to flow out to sea with the ebb tide."<sup>22</sup>

Commissioner Lin's men spent three weeks slowly liquidating the drugs, making a "public spectacle" of it in the process.<sup>23</sup> This was arguably the last triumphant moment for China in its relations with the West ... until Mao Zedong's armies fought American troops to a standstill in the Korean War more than a century later. But the principal effect of Lin's aggressive confiscation and disposal was to give the British the casus belli they were in fact seeking. In the words of historian Peter Ward Fay, Britain's logic was, "Why not take the [the Chinese] to war, and at its victorious conclusion make them pay for the opium and for the war too?"<sup>24</sup>

Commissioner Lin held to a hard line, even writing Queen Victoria demanding cessation of the opium trade on moral and economic grounds. Alas, there was little hope of swaying British foreign policy, then being crafted by the hawkish Lord Palmerston. Preliminary hostilities erupted in the fall of 1839 as Commissioner Lin readied the defense of Canton. But when the full British fleet finally arrived in the summer of 1840, to Lin's surprise they did not

attack the city. Instead, they simply bypassed Canton and sailed up the coast, handily capturing strategic coastal positions near Shanghai.

Wei Yuan himself became personally involved in the war in September 1840, when British surveyor, Captain Peter Anstruther, was captured while on a reconnaissance mission in Zhejiang Province, and local officials asked Wei, already considered something of an authority on “barbarian affairs,” to help interrogate him.<sup>25</sup> When Wei arrived at the prison, he pumped the surveyor for information about England, a place Wei Yuan had no prospect of visiting but about which he was intensely curious. With an iron ring around his neck and eighteen-pound irons weighing down his legs, Captain Anstruther answered Wei’s basic questions about his far-off country as best he could. As the captive explained, because his island nation (“Ying-jie-li,” as Wei transliterated it) was so small, his countrymen had been forced to rely on sea commerce, and thus had mastered new techniques in shipbuilding and firearms manufacture in the process. Anstruther also told Wei how the English government’s revenue came almost entirely from maritime customs, rather than from taxes on land or labor, as was the case in China. After the interrogation, Wei drafted an intelligence report, “Briefing on England,” writing pointedly, “England neither produces nor consumes opium, but rather, by enjoying the profits of opium smoking, leads the West in terms of wealth and power.”<sup>26</sup>

While Wei was questioning his British prisoner, Lin’s defenses, thanks to his installation of foreign-bought artillery, were keeping Canton safe from British attack. Wei’s *Account* quotes Lin as being confident that “three million taels would buy all the ships and guns that China wanted; and, by thus imitating the enemy’s best methods, we should be able to constrain him with his own weapons, and allow him to wear himself out in seeking to attack us.”<sup>27</sup>

However, Lin’s view of the need to “imitate the enemy’s best methods” was decidedly in the minority. Most of Chinese officialdom instead maintained an attitude of disdain for all things foreign, a sentiment keenly felt by Westerners in China such as Duncan MacPherson, who fought in the Opium War and wrote in his memoirs, “Haughty, cruel, and hypocritical they despise all other nations but their own; they regard themselves as faultless. Next to the son of heaven, a true Chinaman thinks himself the greatest man in the world, and China beyond all comparison, to be the most civilized, the most learned, the most fruitful, the most ancient, in short, the only country in the world.”<sup>28</sup> As Wei saw things, Lin Zexu was caught in a political no-man’s-land between a xenophobic war party and an appeasement party, both woefully ignorant of the true nature of the new kind of threat represented by British sea power, and they scapegoated Lin for a war that was going poorly everywhere except in Canton.

In late September 1840, the court recalled Lin to Beijing for censure. His replacement in Canton foolishly reversed his fortification policies, leaving the city exposed to a British assault. It came in January 1841 and was punishing, forcing Lin’s hapless replacement to promise the British seven million taels as an opium indemnity, along with rights to occupy the desolate, malaria-infested nearby island called Hong Kong. But Emperor Daoguang refused to sign off on the terms negotiated by his Canton commissioner. As Wei told it, “The Emperor was furious when he heard of the capture of the forts [at Canton] and the menacing attitude of the [British] rebels, and said he would not give a cent for the opium nor yield an inch of territory.”<sup>29</sup>

So, in standard Chinese bureaucratic fashion, which inevitably seeks to pin blame for defeat on someone, Lin's replacement was arrested as an appeaser. In the spring of 1842 when the next, hawkish Canton commissioner ordered a foolhardy sneak attack on the British fleet, the full-scale British counterassault that followed led to the fall of the city and a final ignominious defeat. That summer Lin Zexu was banished with his two sons to Ili, a remote northwestern frontier town on the edge of the deserts of what is now Xinjiang Province. Passing through Zhenjiang on his way into exile, he spent an evening with Wei Yuan commiserating over the sorry course of the war and the urgent need to catch up with Western military superiority, while lamenting their powerlessness to reverse China's decline. As was common practice among Confucian gentlemen, Wei composed a poem on the occasion of seeing his friend and mentor head off into exile:

On a day fraught with countless emotions, we meet but cannot say a word.

Like worms that curl up in a storm, as time races by we must laugh at our efforts to learn how to slay a dragon.

You have studied their methods for three years, yet we are in danger from both north and south.

Even if there is a chance to go to Beijing, still we must focus our strategy on the sea.

In a single night we come together and go separate ways, like joy and regret in a single body ...

We should not waste the moon in Zhenjiang, bosom friends can escape their predicament with wine.<sup>30</sup>

As Lin Zexu later wrote, in plainer prose: "Now it is even more difficult to check the wildfire. After all, ships, guns, and a water force are absolutely indispensable. Even if the rebellious barbarians had fled and returned beyond the seas, these things would still have to be urgently planned for, in order to work out the permanent defense of our sea frontier. Moreover, unless we have weapons, what other help can we get now to drive away the crocodile and to get rid of the whales?"<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, new military technology like the HMS *Nemesis*—the world's first ironclad, steam-powered paddle warship—gave the British an enormous advantage as they mounted another attack near Shanghai in 1842 and then brazenly proceeded up the Yangtze River. Occupying the confluence of the Yangtze River and the Grand Canal, on which southern rice was transhipped north to the capital, they had the Chinese empire by its jugular. The British had effectively cut off trade, including the emperor's food supply, at the country's commercial heart, creating a desperate situation. Wealthy salt merchants in Yangzhou (Wei presumably among them) even offered to pay a ransom of half a million silver taels so that British ships might leave their city and property unmolested. But, reported Wei, "junks docked in other Yangtze River towns ... were put to the torch."<sup>32</sup> And when "over eighty foreign ships thundering in the river," as Wei described them, finally reached Nanjing, the distraught emperor gave his lead negotiator "carte blanche to act as he should see fit."<sup>33</sup> The once hawkish court was now desperate for peace terms, lest the British bombard Nanjing itself. "All their anxiety, which was too powerful to be concealed," a British officer observed of the Chinese in Nanjing, "was centered upon one main object—our immediate departure."<sup>34</sup>



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