

THE FALL AND RISE OF CHINA



HEALING THE TRAUMA OF HISTORY

PAUL U. UNSCHULD

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REAKTION BOOKS

Published by Reaktion Books Ltd
33 Great Sutton Street
London EC1V 0DX, UK
www.reaktionbooks.co.uk

First published 2013

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Translated by Nicolas Kumanoff

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Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Bell & Bain, Glasgow

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78023 168 6

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Introduction

A nation's past is easily forgotten –
and also not so easily forgotten
A Cheng 阿城

IN JANUARY 2011, when Hu Jintao, the president of the People's Republic of China, was welcomed by U.S. president Barack Obama on a state visit to Washington, DC, the official protocol conveyed the impression that here, two heads of state were meeting as equals. Pundits even called the Chinese leader 'the most powerful person in the world' – a designation long reserved for the American president.

During the preceding century and a half China had been consistently humiliated, first by the Western imperial powers and then even more by its smaller island neighbour, Japan. For a time the 'Middle Kingdom' seemed on the verge of becoming a pawn of foreign interests. Toward the close of the last imperial dynasty, internal conflicts further eroded the great country's global standing to its nadir.

Then, in a process probably unmatched in history, this great culture laid low by another, younger civilization recovered vigorously from its seemingly hopeless plight – so much so that today the state and its leaders, with its burgeoning economic and military might, are again globally acknowledged and not infrequently feared.

This Herculean task could only be accomplished because China, confronted by the evident superiority of Western science and technology, had committed to an unsparing self-diagnosis which identified the aspects of Western civilization the country had to adopt in order to remove the cultural impediments to China's own renaissance. Instead of venting its many individual

aversions to the West as collective hatred of the aggressors, China took a path of reason and fundamental renewal.

In the course of their confrontation with Western culture, Chinese intellectuals and policy-makers swiftly recognized that their country could not hope to stand up to the imperialist powers simply by buying Western weapons and technology. Beginning in the early twentieth century, therefore, attention was lavished on the full spectrum of Western thinking. Discussions over how best to pull the country out of its misery quoted the most diverse philosophers from the past and present of both Europe and America. In the middle of the century, ongoing intellectual disputes and violent conflicts culminated in the People's Republic of China, which, gripped for two more decades by extremist political turmoil, itself appeared closer to economic oblivion than to a new age of regional – let alone global – dominance. Only from the early 1970s did China begin to reap the rewards of having examined its own cultural past and the Western civilization that was believed to be superior in so many ways.

The first half of this book traces the course of China's agony in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The facts are familiar to anyone who knows the country; I have sequenced them here in a concise form.¹ The second half of the book explores a distinctive feature of China's resurgence that has not previously been identified as such. China sought responsibility for its predicament, as well as the healing of its collective trauma, exclusively within itself. The long-prevalent mentality in Europe of blaming one's own misfortune on the actual or alleged parties that caused it, and of demanding their future support, was and remains alien to China, irrespective of the country's adoption of Marxist thought and the Communist Party's leading role in society.

Profoundly wounded by both the Western nations and Japan, China prescribed for itself a therapy that followed the same principle that Chinese medicine uses in treating individual illnesses: the cause lies first and foremost within oneself. Evil can penetrate from outside only if one opens up a breach for it. Prevention and therapy must therefore always begin with one's own deficiencies and mistakes.

One can certainly characterize the patterns of China's relations with the West as a 'clash of cultures', but this struggle is not marked by terrorist attacks and counterstrikes. It is a quiet and subtle conflict, and it is still far from clear which side will be victorious.

PART I

*China – Zhongguo –
An Empire at the Centre
of the World*

A Distant King is Turned Away

AT THE INSTIGATION of the British East India Company, in 1793 George III sent a delegation to China led by Lord Macartney. The British hoped to persuade the Imperial Court in Beijing to open up the vast Chinese Empire to trade with Great Britain. Laden with gifts, Macartney presented an array of goods as evidence of the economic prowess that the British hoped would impress the emperor. For its part, the Chinese court sent ships and vehicles festooned with banners reading 'Embassy from the land of England for the delivery of tributes' for all to see, and received the English ambassadors with ritual ceremonies of epic dimensions. The emperor spoke personally with the English ambassador. In September, however, in two edicts, the monarch conveyed to Macartney his rejection of the British proposals.

The language used in these documents eloquently illustrates the air of impregnability surrounding the Emperor Qianlong (1711–1799), one of China's most glorious rulers, and how culturally superior the Chinese side felt. The lofty condescension with which Qianlong responded to the British petitions demonstrates the pride with which the alien Manchurian dynasty ruled its domains. After conquering China more than a century earlier the Manchu immediately recognized the greatness of the country's culture and civilization. Knowing that they were horsemen from the north who ruled over a glorious and ancient civilization in no way stopped them from broadly identifying with their dominions.

History is littered with episodes of invaders irretrievably destroying great and venerable cultures. The Manchu did not take that path. They knew the value of the treasure they had won control of, and in the succession of the emperors Kangxi (*r.* 1661–1722), Yongzheng (*r.* 1722–35) and Qianlong (*r.* 1735–

96, de facto until 1799) they led China to another golden age. Frontiers with neighbouring peoples were largely secured and relations with the Russian Tsarist regime handled to the benefit of both sides.

As the supreme ruler of the Middle Kingdom or *zhongguo*, Qianlong worded his reply to the British monarch with cool condescension, flatly rejecting Britain's request to extend trade beyond the small southern port of Macao and the city of Canton. For reasons that to this day remain less than comprehensible, China had abruptly ended a thoroughly promising foray into long-distance seafaring many years earlier and was utterly uninterested in other countries' products. In the eyes of the Manchu these were simple, superfluous trinkets of no benefit to China.

The edicts of Qianlong to George III speak for themselves. Given here complete, they began a process in which China first fell from the heights of cultural and economic greatness to the depths of subservience to foreign interests and finally – and uniquely among civilizations in decline – used its own strengths to rise back to power.

You, O King, live beyond the confines of many seas, nevertheless, impelled by your humble desire to partake of the benefits of our civilisation, you have dispatched a mission respectfully bearing your memorial. Your Envoy has crossed the seas and paid his respects at my Court on the anniversary of my birthday. To show your devotion, you have also sent offerings of your country's produce.

I have perused your memorial: the earnest terms in which it is couched reveal a respectful humility on your part, which is highly praiseworthy. In consideration of the fact that your Ambassador and his deputy have come a long way with your memorial and tribute, I have shown them high favour and have allowed them to be introduced into my presence. To manifest my indulgence, I have entertained them at a banquet and made them numerous gifts. I have also caused presents to be forwarded to the Naval Commander and six hundred of his offi-

cers and men, although they did not come to Peking, so that they too may share in my all-embracing kindness.

As to your entreaty to send one of your nationals to be accredited to my Celestial Court and to be in control of your country's trade with China, this request is contrary to all usage of my dynasty and cannot possibly be entertained. It is true that Europeans, in the service of the dynasty, have been permitted to live at Peking, but they are compelled to adopt Chinese dress, they are strictly confined to their own precincts and are never permitted to return home. You are presumably familiar with our dynastic regulations. Your proposed Envoy to my Court could not be placed in a position similar to that of European officials in Peking who are forbidden to leave China, nor could he, on the other hand, be allowed liberty of movement and the privilege of corresponding with his own country; so that you would gain nothing by his residence in our midst.

Moreover, our Celestial dynasty possesses vast territories, and tribute missions from the dependencies are provided for by the Department for Tributary States, which ministers to their wants and exercises strict control over their movements. It would be quite impossible to leave them to their own devices. Supposing that your Envoy should come to our Court, his language and national dress differ from that of our people, and there would be no place in which to bestow him. It may be suggested that he might imitate the Europeans permanently resident in Peking and adopt the dress and customs of China, but, it has never been our dynasty's wish to force people to do things unseemly and inconvenient. Besides, supposing I sent an Ambassador to reside in your country, how could you possibly make for him the requisite arrangements? Europe consists of many other nations besides your own: if each and all demanded to be represented at our Court, how could we possibly consent? The thing is utterly impracticable. How can our dynasty alter its whole procedure and system of etiquette, established for more than a century, in order to meet your individual views? If it be said that your object is to exercise control over your country's trade, your nationals have had full

liberty to trade at Canton for many a year, and have received the greatest consideration at our hands. Missions have been sent by Portugal and Italy, preferring similar requests. The Throne appreciated their sincerity and loaded them with favours, besides authorising measures to facilitate their trade with China. You are no doubt aware that, when my Canton merchant, Wu Chao-ping, was in debt to the foreign ships, I made the Viceroy advance the monies due, out of the provincial treasury, and ordered him to punish the culprit severely. Why then should foreign nations advance this utterly unreasonable request to be represented at my Court? Peking is nearly two thousand miles from Canton, and at such a distance what possible control could any British representative exercise?

If you assert that your reverence for Our Celestial dynasty fills you with a desire to acquire our civilisation, our ceremonies and code of laws differ so completely from your own that, even if your Envoy were able to acquire the rudiments of our civilisation, you could not possibly transplant our manners and customs to your alien soil. Therefore, however adept the Envoy might become, nothing would be gained thereby.

Swaying the wide world, I have but one aim in view, namely, to maintain a perfect governance and to fulfil the duties of the State: strange and costly objects do not interest me. If I have commanded that the tribute offerings sent by you, O King, are to be accepted, this was solely in consideration for the spirit which prompted you to dispatch them from afar. Our dynasty's majestic virtue has penetrated unto every country under Heaven, and Kings of all nations have offered their costly tribute by land and sea. 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. This then is my answer to your request to appoint a representative at my Court, a request contrary to our dynastic usage, which would only result in inconvenience to yourself. I have expounded my wishes in detail and have commanded your tribute Envoys to leave in peace on their homeward journey. It behoves you, O King, to respect my sentiments and to display

even greater devotion and loyalty in future, so that, by perpetual submission to our Throne, you may secure peace and prosperity for your country hereafter. Besides making gifts (of which I enclose an inventory) to each member of your Mission, I confer upon you, O King, valuable presents in excess of the number usually bestowed on such occasions, including silks and curios – a list of which is likewise enclosed. Do you reverently receive them and take note of my tender goodwill towards you! A special mandate.

You, O King, from afar have yearned after the blessings of our civilisation, and in your eagerness to come into touch with our converting influence have sent an Embassy across the sea bearing a memorial. I have already taken note of your respectful spirit of submission, have treated your mission with extreme favour and loaded it with gifts, besides issuing a mandate to you, O King, and honouring you with the bestowal of valuable presents. Thus has my indulgence been manifested.

Yesterday your Ambassador petitioned my Ministers to memorialise me regarding your trade with China, but his proposal is not consistent with our dynastic usage and cannot be entertained. Hitherto, all European nations, including your own country's barbarian merchants, have carried on their trade with our Celestial Empire at Canton. Such has been the procedure for many years, although our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders. There was therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce. But as the tea, silk and porcelain which the Celestial Empire produces, are absolute necessities to European nations and to yourselves, we have permitted, as a signal mark of favour, that foreign hong's [merchant firms] should be established at Canton, so that your wants might be supplied and your country thus participate in our beneficence. But your Ambassador has now put forward new requests which completely fail to recognise the Throne's principle to 'treat strangers from afar with indulgence', and to exercise a pacifying control over barbarian tribes,

the world over. Moreover, our dynasty, swaying the myriad races of the globe, extends the same benevolence towards all. Your England is not the only nation trading at Canton. If other nations, following your bad example, wrongfully importune my ear with further impossible requests, how will it be possible for me to treat them with easy indulgence? Nevertheless, I do not forget the lonely remoteness of your island, cut off from the world by intervening wastes of sea, nor do I overlook your excusable ignorance of the usages of our Celestial Empire. I have consequently commanded my Ministers to enlighten your Ambassador on the subject, and have ordered the departure of the mission. But I have doubts that, after your Envoy's return he may fail to acquaint you with my view in detail or that he may be lacking in lucidity, so that I shall now proceed . . . to issue my mandate on each question separately. In this way you will, I trust, comprehend my meaning . . .

Your request for a small island near Chusan, where your merchants may reside and goods be warehoused, arises from your desire to develop trade. As there are neither foreign hong's nor interpreters in or near Chusan, where none of your ships have ever called, such an island would be utterly useless for your purposes. Every inch of the territory of our Empire is marked on the map and the strictest vigilance is exercised over it all: even tiny islets and farlying sandbanks are clearly defined as part of the provinces to which they belong. Consider, moreover, that England is not the only barbarian land which wishes to establish . . . trade with our Empire: supposing that other nations were all to imitate your evil example and beseech me to present them each and all with a site for trading purposes, how could I possibly comply? This also is a flagrant infringement of the usage of my Empire and cannot possibly be entertained.

The next request, for a small site in the vicinity of Canton city, where your barbarian merchants may lodge or, alternatively, that there be no longer any restrictions over their movements at Aomen, has arisen from the following causes. Hitherto, the barbarian merchants of Europe have had a definite locality assigned to them at Aomen for residence and trade,

and have been forbidden to encroach an inch beyond the limits assigned to that locality If these restrictions were withdrawn, friction would inevitably occur between the Chinese and your barbarian subjects, and the results would militate against the benevolent regard that I feel towards you. From every point of view, therefore, it is best that the regulations now in force should continue unchanged

Regarding your nation's worship of the Lord of Heaven, it is the same religion as that of other European nations. Ever since the beginning of history, sage Emperors and wise rulers have bestowed on China a moral system and inculcated a code, which from time immemorial has been religiously observed by the myriads of my subjects. There has been no hankering after heterodox doctrines. Even the European (missionary) officials in my capital are forbidden to hold intercourse with Chinese subjects; they are restricted within the limits of their appointed residences, and may not go about propagating their religion. The distinction between Chinese and barbarians is most strict, and your Ambassador's request that barbarians shall be given full liberty to disseminate their religion is utterly unreasonable.

It may be, O King, that the above proposals have been wantonly made by your Ambassador on his own responsibility, or peradventure you yourself are ignorant of our dynastic regulations and had no intention of transgressing them when you expressed these wild ideas and hopes If, after the receipt of this explicit decree, you lightly give ear to the representations of your subordinates and allow your barbarian merchants to proceed to Chêkiang and Tientsin, with the object of landing and trading there, the ordinances of my Celestial Empire are strict in the extreme, and the local officials, both civil and military, are bound reverently to obey the law of the land. Should your vessels touch the shore, your merchants will assuredly never be permitted to land or to reside there, but will be subject to instant expulsion. In that event your barbarian merchants will have had a long journey for nothing. Do not say that you were not warned in due time! Tremblingly obey and show no negligence! A special mandate!²

Twenty years later, in 1816, the British crown launched a second attempt to establish formal commercial relations with the Empire of China, to place the existing – and for the British, totally inadequate – exchange of goods on a broader footing. Lord Amherst, who would go on to become Governor-General of India, was sent to follow in the footsteps of the hapless Macartney. He did not get far. After landing in Baihe he negotiated with Chinese protocol officers over the terms of an audience with Emperor Jiaqing. Amherst refused to kowtow before the emperor – that act so despised among Europeans – unless the next Chinese official to visit the king in London agreed to likewise kneel and bow his head to the ground, so as to show the British crown the same level of regard. The Chinese declined and Amherst sailed away having accomplished nothing.

By then the British East India Company had for nearly a century been exclusively managing Britain's trade with China, which the Chinese strictly circumscribed. For various reasons, in 1834 the British government decided to revoke the private company's monopoly and place the China trade under state control. Lord Napier was appointed the first Superintendent of Trade in Canton and immediately set about provoking the Chinese.³

The British East India Company had always kept to the Chinese trade terms, which strictly forbade foreign traders from establishing direct contacts with the Chinese bureaucracy. Their designated counterparts and negotiating partners were an exclusive guild of Chinese merchants. This guild was in turn authorized to discuss any of the foreigners' concerns with the Chinese authorities. Ignoring these rules, Napier set out from Macao on 15 July 1834 for Canton to contact the Chinese viceroy there. At the gates of the city he conveyed to the local governor a letter that was rejected out of hand because it was not marked as a 'petition', as was demanded of emissaries from foreign states required to pay tributes. Napier refused to use this term, saying that it violated his country's honour. The Chinese official had little choice but to remain unyielding, otherwise he would probably have been put to death. When Napier stubbornly insisted on a direct meeting, the viceroy showed his

annoyance. He fired Napier's Chinese servants, blocked all deliveries of food and drink and ordered soldiers to seal off the emissary's apartment.

Whereas the dismissal of Lord Macartney forty years earlier had been worded in condescending yet diplomatically polite language, the dispute between Governor Lu and Napier degenerated into an exchange of insults. In an announcement published in Canton, Lu first expressed outrage at the Englishman's gall for writing in terms that implied that the two sides were on equal terms. In a riposte likewise published in Canton, Napier accused the Chinese authorities of 'perverse' behaviour that would cause the 'ruin of thousands of hard-working Chinese who make their living by trading with Europeans.' Finally dropping all pretences of etiquette, Governor Lu again wrote publicly:

A lawless foreign slave, Napier, has released a statement.⁴ We have no idea how he, a barbaric dog of a foreign nation, could have the brazen insolence of presuming to call himself superintendent. As an alien, uncivilized superintendent and a person who finds himself in an official capacity, he should have at least the scantest understanding of decency and the law.⁵

On 2 September the governor ordered that all trade between the foreigners and the Chinese merchants in Canton be stopped. The costs for the British side now became too high and after three weeks, Napier left for Macao, empty-handed and red-faced. The Chinese were convinced that they had taught the British a lesson once and for all. The officials did not know that they had set off a chain of events that, far from just parrying insult, would become a turning point in Chinese history. Even during his standoff with Governor Lu, Napier vividly rendered the necessary consequences of the incident in his correspondence with Lord Palmerston at the Foreign Office:

The governor has committed an outrage against the British Crown that will be paid back in kind . . . I can only beseech

Your Lordship once again to force [the Chinese side] to recognize my authority and the business of the king invested in me. If you can do this we will have no problem opening up the harbours.⁶

For a time, legal trade between Britain and China failed to advance after this incident. Meanwhile, an illegal process had been set in motion that could no longer be halted. Only a few more years would pass before the British lost their patience.

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