



ISRAEL EPSTEIN FROM OPIUM WAR TO LIBERATION

Third Edition (Revised & Enlarged)

MODERN CHINESE HISTORY
A JOINT PUBLICATION

Israel Epstein

From Opium War to Liberation

Third Edition (Revised & Enlarged)

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

“From Opium War to Liberation” was first published in Peking in 1956 and in an enlarged and revised second edition in 1964.

Its purpose was never to give a complete history of China in the crucially transforming century it deals with. Economic and cultural aspects, for example, were not treated fully enough. Any attempt to be all-embracing would make a far longer book, or many books, as well as lead into areas best left to writers with more special knowledge.

What then was the aim of this brief volume? It was to assist Western-educated readers (not just those of Western origin but many on all continents who had been so schooled) to “shift gears” from the history they had been taught to that which they had not been or had been led to consider marginal. It was to make them aware of the need for “reversing the reversal of history,” in Mao Tse-tung’s sharply

clarifying phrase, and to call to their minds some original realities.

The approach taken was to move from the known to the less known. Hence, many older English-language accounts were cited but set in a broader framework, to bring out certain aspects not only of Chinese but of Western history which they had omitted or obscured. One was the impact of imperialism, not just on China and other dominated lands but on the peoples of the imperialist countries themselves. Another was the objectively existing mutual support, sometimes conscious and sometimes implicit, but too often entirely forgotten, of the past struggles of many peoples and nations, with those of the Chinese people.

Preparing and writing this book was also a deepening of self-education for the author who was energetically instructed in youth (having grown up in a foreign-administered and garrisoned enclave in old China) in the European and American-centred fashion of those days or, in plain words, stuffed with many of the self-justifications and rationales of aggression and colonialism. But with the impact of many influences and of first-hand experience, particularly as a journalist on China's war fronts in the 1930's and 40's, came a growing emancipation from such concepts. Followed later by the desire to place into historical context the things learned (and unlearned).

To help readers toward a similar reassessment seemed very necessary 20-odd years ago when this book was first written. Since then the illusion-dispelling work has been done, better than by books, by great world shifts which have left no-one unaffected. One was the further rise of the new China. Another was the chain-reaction of national liberation in Asia, Africa and Latin America. And today there is the basic movement of the Third World peoples, the earth's majority —

as the most active and widespread force against imperialism and super-power domination, dictation and exploitation – from which they have suffered so much and so long, and do not want to suffer more.

Under the impact of these vast changes, the writing of China's history in the English language, has also changed, but not enough. No longer is it so blatantly Eurocentric. Authors who know Chinese and work from Chinese sources have ceased to be the exception. Yet too often they still incline toward imperialism and the overthrown ruling classes of old China. And many "Pekinologists" still consider it China's misfortune to have missed out on the "normal" road of Capitalism. This occurred, they theorise, through some historical accident or unwise choice. Things might have been different – if only. If only, in the late 19th and early 20th century, China's early advocates of Westernization had found a more adequate base in Ching dynasty officialdom. If only, in 1927-49, the United States had backed certain private Chinese banks, national industries and bourgeois reform trends instead of the Kuomintang's semi-feudalism, bureaucratic monopoly capitalism and Chiang Kai-shek. And so on.

Equipped now with the Chinese language and with access to computerized data banks, such academics have taken amazing pains to sift the past for evidence of their desired "if onlys." And they have come up with masses of signs and portents – almost everything, in fact, except the general reason why what actually happened was so different.

What actually happened was China's Marxist-led revolution and adoption of the socialist road. To this, the Pekinologists concede at most a temporary inevitability. Sooner or later, they imply, China must get on the capitalist road in one form or another from many angles. To them there is no other

normal avenue of long-term development, especially industrial development — all else seems aberration. And socialism itself, says one fashionable trend, is merely a mode of capital formation for countries where large private capital did not accumulate, destined, after performing this function, to evaporate. One feels that a motive for such research, and certainly for the official and corporate grants it has so often received, is the desire to make socialism vanish more quickly.

But the labourers in this sour-grape vineyard have carefully looked the other way from one basic fact — that world capitalism itself, in its imperialist stage, blocked the capitalist road for China, making all their “if onlys” into impossibilities. The real motion of world history had made the socialist road the normal one for China in our time, as evidenced by the defeat of all other alternatives in actual practice — over more than a hundred years.

Nonetheless, some of them go on unrestrained. In the 1970's there has even been some regurgitation, after an interval during which it had become publicly unseemly, of apologies for the old-style colonial imperialism. Was it so bad after all, the neo-apologists ask. In fact did it ever exist? Perhaps, after all, there were only good intentions and generally good results, marred by bungling and blindness (on both sides) that led to avoidable collisions.

The “if only” school of Western Pekinologists has, since the 1960's, had its counterparts in Moscow. These bewail the misfortune of China's revolution in having departed from their version of the “normal” road — the road advocated by Wang Ming and his like — which history long ago proved could not lead to triumph but only to dependence, disaster and surrender.

They have their own set of “if onlys.” If only China's Communists had not made a shift of emphasis to rural

warfare and not come into overall leadership of the Party and army in 1935 during the Long March. If only there had been no rectification movement in Yen-an in the early 1940's to endorse Mao Tse-tung Thought as Marxism-Leninism applied to Chinese reality. And, if only, after the liberation, the People's Republic of China had chosen satellite-type instead of independent development, the people's communes had never been set up and no struggles against revisionism and hegemony had ever been launched in China and worldwide.

The Kremlin's establishmentarians are not concerned with history alone any more than those of the West. They too, are investigating why they "lost China" yesterday in order to somehow get it back tomorrow. But there has also emerged, in the 1970's, a difference. The rulers of the capitalist U.S.A. through lessons learned in China itself, in Korea and in Indo-China, are not eager to re-enact the scenarios that led to those defeats. But the new social-imperialists in the Kremlin, with a million troops on China's border, have inherited the old Dulles and MacArthur itch.

To orthodox Pekinologists of both hues the course actually taken by China, guided by Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-tung Thought, is not merely a departure from the norm. They persist in regarding what has happened in front of their eyes as not quite real. Yet it is precisely this course that has accomplished things neither thought possible; not only the victory of China's revolution but the feeding and clothing of her people and the laying, within only thirty years, of strong foundations for socialist growth and future advance to communism. Certainly there have been difficulties, errors and setbacks in the process. But so there were in the phase of the struggle before 1949, which was so conclusively won.

Clearly, the original purpose of this book — to help reverse

the reversal of history — is still a needed one and will long remain so, even though some of the settings may change. It is as essential as it ever was to make the study of the past serve the present and the future of the peoples and not of those who seek to ride on their backs. The history of any country must be viewed from the standpoint of its own people, and its world historic context must be seen from the standpoint of the peoples of the whole world.

To that cause it is hoped that the present edition will make a small contribution. To the authentic political and historical material increasingly being made available in and from China itself, including some that might modify statements and evaluations in this book, may it serve as a bridge. To the conscientious and beneficial work being done by students of China abroad who seek genuine understanding among the peoples on their forward road, may it be a useful companion.

An immediate reason for this re-issue is that not a few readers still find the older editions (now out of print) useful and have urged a new one. The revisions and amplifications, except for a few obviously more current, were done in 1966 for an edition never completed. Illustrations are added for the first time. Responsibility for lacks or errors is the author's.

Peking, November 1979

Note: This book still uses the traditional English (Wade-Giles) transliteration of Chinese, instead of the new and more scientific system (*pinyin*) now common in China and abroad. The reason is that the bulk of the type was set some time ago. In any new printing, the changeover will be made.

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I

OLD CHINA

The Chinese state and Chinese civilization go back thousands of years. In the course of their long history, the Chinese people produced many great fighters for national independence and social liberation, as well as distinguished natural scientists, inventors, engineers, philosophers, poets and military strategists. They were one of the first nations to advance material culture to a very high level. Their skilful farming provided the basis for a large population. Their best-known industrial and scientific inventions included paper, silk, gunpowder, the mariner's compass, printing and porcelain. In addition, China anticipated Europe by centuries in the use of:

Coal for fuel.

Deep drilling for salt and natural gas (on the principle now applied in oilfields).

The waterwheel-driven bellows in metal smelting.

The differential gear and clockwork in mechanics.

The stern-post rudder, watertight compartments and the paddle-wheel for ships.

Segmental-arch and suspension bridges and canal locks.

The seismoscope to detect earthquakes.

The abacus, a highly accurate value of π and the binomial theorem in mathematics.

The crossbow, cannon and gunpowder rocket in war.*

China's people began to work iron later than some others. But, owing partly to their pioneer employment of coal, they moved ahead very rapidly in this very important technique. The first century historian Pliny wrote that in the Rome of his day the iron that came from China was considered the best.** The Roman name for China was *Serica*, the land of silk, testifying to the fame of her textiles, another article of trade between the two empires.

For nearly two thousand years, in fact, China's productive skills were ahead of the West's. And medieval travellers like Marco Polo marvelled at such evidence of advanced economic organization as the use of paper money, then unknown elsewhere (though Polo, a merchant interested

* For much more on these and other inventions see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge University Press), a carefully documented investigation, several volumes of which have been published since 1954.

**Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, Vol. XXXIV, pp.41, 145. And in "The Development of Iron and Steel Technology in China" (London, 1958), Prof. Needham stated, "Between the 5th and the 17th centuries it was the Chinese, not the Europeans, who could make as much as they wanted of cast iron and who were accustomed to make steel by advanced methods quite unknown to the western world," and "nowhere in the medieval world except China was it possible to find relatively abundant supplies of cast iron and steel."

in money, not culture, did not even mention the fact that these bills, as well as Chinese books, were reproduced by printing, an invention of crucial importance likewise still unheard of in Europe at the time). All visitors up to the end of the eighteenth century spoke of China in a tone of admiration for its advances.

But revolutionary changes in Europe soon proved that even the longest-established technical supremacy under the old social system, feudalism, could be quickly outpaced under a young one, such as capitalism then was. China, remaining under feudal landlord rule as for some 2,500 years past, quickly came to be classed as "backward." And western professors began their endless harping on Chinese and indeed all Eastern Society being "static in nature."

This idea is unscientific and chauvinist. It was tailored to help capitalist imperialism present ruthless aggression against Asia as the spreading of "civilization and progress." Today, in a new version, it is being peddled by those who fear the now revolutionary East. One school has attacked the socialist system that must succeed capitalism everywhere as not progressive at all but a reincarnation of age-old "Oriental despotism"* based on a "hydraulic society" (i.e. born of the control of widespread irrigation works by an autocratic centralized state). Like Hitler's race theories, and pursuing similar aims, such concepts are meant to indoctrinate people with the notion that the forms of development of only one section of mankind have both virtue

* This was the theme song of K.A. Wittfogel, in the "cold war" period a pet "China historian" of imperialism. His thesis, starting from a distortion of Marx, replaced economic and social forces by geographical ones as the determinant of history. Politically a turncoat, he goaded McCarthyite witch hunters in the U.S. against his own academic colleagues.

and value. Those of all the rest are seen as debased, "alien" and menacing. This is a very old political trick, having nothing to do with historical or any other science. Its modern purpose has been to make the people of imperialist states forget questions of class power and of progress and reaction within each country (the very issues that are, indeed, common to all humanity) and make them pliable tools in the hands of rulers of "their own kind" that is, their own oppressors against the plain folk of other lands.

In actual fact, and contrary to such ideas, China's development has followed the same general path as that of other societies. And her pace has at times been faster, as well as sometimes slower, than theirs. She emerged from primitive communal society (clan and tribal) to slavery, and from slavery to feudalism, centuries before Europe, and so was ahead. Then she stayed in feudalism twice as long as Europe, and so fell behind.

Now things have changed again. Instead of establishing capitalism and being saddled with it for hundreds of years like the western countries, China is making a very quick transition from the revolutionary overthrow of foreign imperialist control and internal feudalism to the position of a strong and modern socialist state. So today, in a broader social sense, it is the old capitalist world that suffers from "stagnation." (This is not to say, of course, that China in building socialism does not have, besides a centuries-old technological lag, the burden of mainly feudal, rather than capitalist, habits and traditions to overcome.)

As to why China's feudalism lasted so very long, her historians still do not claim to have the final answer. But the following causes have been much discussed.

First, there were the characteristics that mark, to varying degrees, all feudal societies:

The peasants themselves produced most of the handicraft articles they used; commodities did not circulate on a scale large enough to destroy the local self-supporting economy.

The huge rents collected by the landlord class went mainly to satisfy the appetites of its members and the needs of its rule. The latter included the pomp of the court, a swarm of officials, and many devastating frontier wars as well as wars to suppress the people at home. All this prevented any great growth of capital invested in industry and trade.

Second, and important, were some specific features of Chinese feudalism seen by some historians as follows:

The centralized state machine, headed by the emperor, took form very early. In China, unlike Europe, the central power did not gain supremacy through an alliance of the monarch and the nascent bourgeoisie in the cities. Instead, a vast imperial bureaucracy tightly organized from the capital down to the rural counties served the needs of the whole landlord class headed by the emperor. This bureaucracy did not form a distinct ruling group, as claimed by the particularists of "Oriental society" who try to present it as one proof of the "basically different" social nature of the East. It was a highly developed tool of feudalism — a system which, in both its Eastern and its Western forms, is characterized by a landed ruling class exploiting the peasantry through rent (or tribute) in labour, products or money. In China, the towns were administered by the officials and garrisoned by the troops of her dominant landlord class. This left no opportunity for the growth of autonomous armed urban strongholds of the commercial and industrial capitalists, as did the mutual strife of local lords in

Europe.

Whether the superstructure of Chinese feudalism is seen as “typical” for this order of society or as a “peculiar” and hardly recognizable form depends upon the angle from which one is looking, i.e. whether medieval Europe or old China is taken as the standard. What is certain is that the Chinese form was highly elaborate, and centralized to a degree hardly paralleled in any other large country. This also contributed to the system’s long life.

Some of the main branches of mining and manufacture, such as iron, salt, and to some extent silk and porcelain, and of trade such as that in tea and horses, were early monopolized by the landlord state. Merchants could operate in these fields only under licences which the feudal authorities could revoke at any time. Artisans in these controlled industries were mostly neither wage workers nor free craftsmen but state serfs. Merchants were low in political status and were generally excluded from key governing posts. So when they grew rich, their concern was often not to remain merchants but to get into the ruling landlord class and its bureaucracy.

Organized in this way, Chinese feudalism attached and subordinated the merchant and usurer to the landlord class, and welded all three into a close and stable trinity of exploiters. Thus cemented, it remained intact through many upheavals. It survived numerous economic crises as well as material advances—for China’s feudal economy and technology were not frozen or immobile, as witness the history of her science and invention. But ultimately the ingeniously built superstructure (the political and ideological system) could not immortalize the base (the economic and social system) which it had helped to keep going for such a long period. To draw a modern parallel, the British bourgeoisie’s