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A Brief Modern Chinese History

Translated from the Chinese by Zhen Chi

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Haipeng Zhang and Jinyi Zhai

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1. The Opium Wars and China's Decline

China and the World before 1840

In 1840 the British Empire launched the dirty First Opium War (1840–1842) against China. This war forcibly stopped the historical course in which China enjoyed a fully independent development, and marked the beginning of modern Chinese history. Chinese society gradually became semi-feudal and semi-colonial. A brief discussion of the global situation before the First Opium War follows.

Revolutions broke out in Britain in 1640 and in France in 1789 that led to the dawn of the capitalist system. Thereafter, the capitalist countries of Europe attempted to colonize the world. Using various means such as piracy, robbery, the slave trade, drug (opium) smuggling, wars of aggression, and so on, these colonialists plundered a large amount of wealth from Asia, Africa, and America. This looted wealth constituted a major source of capital and contributed decisively to the growth of European capitalism. History has proven that European capitalist civilization relied heavily on the colonial loot and plunder that it had taken from Asian, African, and American countries and their people, even though it did help to advance humankind. As a consequence, during the seventeenth century, the capitalist countries grew richer and richer while those in the colonized lands became poorer and poorer.

The 1760s saw the Industrial Revolution in Britain, which embodied the vibrant growth of capitalism in Europe. The following five decades in Britain, France, and the United States witnessed the growth of machine production in their economies. Britain, for example, accounted for 50% of the total industrial production in the world and 70% of global coal production in the 1820s. As a consequence, Europe's social productivity grew by leaps and bounds. The rising empires then scrambled to grab colonies around the globe. By the 1830s, the north and south of Africa, Canada, Australia, New Zealand as well as Southwest and Southeast Asia were all colonized by the capitalist powers. However, as a great number of nations were being forcibly thrown into capitalism, China's Qing dynasty (1644–1912) was still independent in Asia. The British Empire, however, set its sights on Qing and began smuggling opium into China. It was under such circumstances that new events took place one after another in China.

Britain and France in the early nineteenth century were the acknowledged leaders of the capitalist world. Old powers such as Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands had declined as early as the seventeenth century. The old powers' colonies were either taken away by the new hegemony or managed to get rid of their colonial oppressors. Many countries in Latin America, which had been brutally ruled by Spain and Portugal, gained their independence in the 1820s. Some went further, developing into bourgeois republics in a single decade or so.

Yet Spain still ruled over the Philippines; Portugal controlled African states such as Angola; and the Netherlands governed the East Indies (present-day Indonesia).

Bourgeois revolution and the Industrial Revolution made Britain and France the most advanced industrial countries in the world. The British Empire grabbed lands and turned them into markets through aggressive wars and colonial aggrandizement. As early as the seventeenth century, the English (later British) East India Company had colonized Madras, Bombay, Calcutta and Bengal in India. By the 1830s, with the exception of several native states in the center and the north, all of India was reduced to a British colony. The British Empire benefited immensely from the colonization of India and, moreover, used India as a base for the invasion of other Asian countries. The British began smuggling opium produced in Bengal into China, some of which was dispatched from India. The British also occupied Penang in Malaysia, merged Malacca and Singapore and, in 1824, Britain set up the Straits Settlement in Southeast Asia. Canada and Australia were colonized in the eighteenth century by the British. The British Empire, on which the sun never set, then established colonial rule in Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) and Cape Town in the early nineteenth century, and in New Zealand in 1839. As a consequence, Britain created a huge colonial empire that covered a total area of 2,000,000 square kilometers and a population of 100,000,000 people.

France was next only to Britain in its colonial quest thanks to the all-powerful French Revolution and the staggering growth of industrial production within France. Nevertheless, France's colonies in North America and India were almost completely lost to Britain in the Seven Years' War (1756–1763). In spite of these losses, France still had Senegal and Guyana and in 1830 colonized Algeria by military force. In Asia, France occupied Vietnam, which became France's new base to invade China.

The United States was originally one of Britain's colonies; however, it later won the War of Independence (1775–1783) and became an independent country. In comparison to Britain and France, the United States was a latecomer to the club of capitalist countries but grew rapidly. In 1803 and 1819, the United States purchased huge amounts of fertile land from France and Spain. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the United States had the longest railroad network in the world. American traders began moving all over the world and, before long, America's capitalist class became the British Empire's accomplice in invading China.

For quite a long time Russia was a European country known to the world for its serfdom. As late as the early nineteenth century, a feudal economy still predominated in Russia. However, Tsarist Russia started to expand as early as the late sixteenth century. In the mid-seventeenth century, Russia annexed Ukraine, conquered Siberia and cast its eyes on China's Black Dragon River. In 1689, Russia and Qing signed the Treaty of Nerchinsk, which defined the eastern border between the two countries. Thirty-eight years later, the middle part of the Sino-Russian border was drawn in accordance with the Treaty of Kyakhta. Then, in the eighteenth century, Belarus and the Baltic region merged with Russia. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, Poland, Finland, Ciscaucasia and Bessarabia were occupied by the Russian Empire. By the 1840s, Tsarist Russia began to show interest in the northeastern part of China.

Britain, France, the United States and Tsarist Russia were early modern China's main aggressors. Germany, however, also saw massive growth in the 1830s before the dawn of the German Reich. Japan, one of China's neighbors, had been ruled by the

Tokugawa shogunate since the seventeenth century, but capitalism in Meiji-era Japan in the 1860s and 1870s grew rapidly. Japan, shocked by China's failure in the Opium War, started to reform. Soon, both Germany and Japan were enrolled in the group of China's invaders.

At that time, some countries still remained proudly independent. Among them, Qing China was the largest. Qing, the last feudal dynasty of China, was in the twilight of its life. With the exception of its northern neighbor, China's neighboring countries in the east, south and southwest were either colonized or about to be colonized. The colossal Ottoman Empire (1299–1922), which stretched over Asia, Africa and Europe, was suffering a great decline. Greece gained its independence in 1830, when Algeria was fully colonized by the French Empire. Egypt would soon get rid of Ottoman control. Additionally, the Ottoman Empire itself was subject to the capitalist powers' aggression.

The remaining great tracts of land that had not been occupied by the Western colonists were the African desert and China. China had not always been the country lying at the center of the world. The traditional Chinese perception of the world—the civilized Chinese are fundamentally different from the barbarians—was hopelessly outdated. Qing's heyday had gone forever. Many of Qing's shortcomings and disadvantages grew increasingly obvious. Worst of all, its ossified feudal institutions and conceptions put a stranglehold on China's productivity growth. According to some demographic studies, the Chinese population increased to 400,000,000 before the First Opium War. As a consequence, cultivated land fell far short of need. The unprecedented population growth exerted enormous pressure on Chinese society. In these conditions drastic land annexation and polarization of the rich and the poor were inevitable. A senior official in the early Qianlong reign (1736–1795) pointed out that a huge number of people who had been in possession of land had no alternative but to become tenant farmers.¹ Echoing this, a minister said that when a family, which had once possessed huge wealth, went bankrupt, thousands of (dependent) families would be reduced to a state of abject poverty.² In these circumstances, social contradictions were inevitably exacerbated. Hong

Liangji 洪亮吉 (1746–1809), a Confucian scholar known to us for his pioneering work in the study of China's unprecedented population growth, clearly recognized that when population growth outpaced land cultivation, society would be engulfed by instability. To make matters worse, ordinary people led a miserable existence because of repeated natural disasters.

China's long-running feudal society had an extremely stable landlord economy. As a small-scale peasant economy and still largely traditional, priority was given to agriculture rather than to commerce. This consequently prevented the highly developed handicraft industry in the Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta from

1 Yang Xifu's 杨锡绂 1748 memorial to the throne—"Chou min shi shu 筹民食疏" (How to multiply the sources of food for the people), in the 45th part of *Huangqing zouyi* 皇清奏议 (A collection of memorials to the thrones of Great Qing).

2 Qian Weicheng 钱维城, "Yangmin lun 养民论" (How to more substantially benefit the people), in the 11th part of *Huangchao jingshi wenbian* 皇朝经世文编 (The Great Qing's treatises regarding the betterment of statecraft).

growing into capitalist industry. As a consequence, China lagged behind Europe in terms of productivity growth. Simply put, China was in decline.

The Qing emperors were completely unaware of capitalist growth in other parts of the world and were still intoxicated with the country's glory and greatness. Take Emperor Qianlong (r. 1736–1796), for example. He mandated that foreigners were not allowed to do business anywhere in China with the exception of Guangzhou (Canton).³ The British king in 1793 sent a seven-hundred-member diplomatic corps headed by George Macartney, a lord, to visit China to showcase his kingdom's scientific and industrial prowess and to invite China to join. A high Qing governor mistakenly took Macartney's mission as a celebration for the Emperor Qianlong's eightieth birthday and thus treated these British merely as emissaries paying tribute. Macartney and his retinue were granted an interview in the Mountain Resort; however, there was an unpleasant dispute over the etiquette of Macartney's audience with the Emperor. As a consequence, the two sides failed to reach an agreement. Qing's ruling elites were all unaware of what was taking place in Britain and Europe, nor did they know that Britain had already emerged as a capitalist power. Rather, they regarded the rising British Empire as a barbarian state. At the same time, the haughty Macartney mission looked down on the Chinese sovereign, refused to observe traditional Chinese etiquette, and was wildly ambitious in trying to cajole Qing to cede territory to their sovereign. In the end, Qing and Britain parted in anger. The Macartney mission revealed the differences between the two civilizations. Qing also failed to seize the opportunity to understand more about the drastically changing world and the advance of capitalism.

Feudal China in its last stages was also plagued by rampant corruption. The ruling landlord class, which had historically been positive for China, did nothing to remedy the accelerating downturn. Emperor Qianlong lived an extravagantly luxurious life, demonstrated in his extensive travels, grand birthday celebrations and in magnificent buildings such as the Old Summer Palace. The ruling Manchu aristocrats turned politically stagnant. The Eight Banners, Qing's proud armed forces that had once been brave and battle-ready, grew increasingly incompetent.

Heshen 和珅, a notorious top aide of Qianlong, epitomized Qing's unchecked and contagious corruption. Heshen played a leading role in Qing's central government for more than two decades and was extremely powerful and greedy. In folk stories he was referred to as the No. 2 Emperor. The new emperor immediately imprisoned Heshen in the wake of the death of Qianlong. The fortune confiscated from Heshen's family was astonishingly high—850,000 *mu* of land and 220,000,000 *taels* of silver. It was five times greater than the state treasury. Some anecdotal evidence said that the confiscation of Heshen's wealth completely filled the treasury of Jiaqing (Qianlong's successor).

China then became a hotbed of peasant revolts. Rebellions broke out one after another late in Qianlong's reign. At the time the White Lotus Society, which was strongly opposed to the Manchu and was very active in Sichuan, Hubei and Shaanxi, posed the greatest threat to Qing. The great mountain ranges between the provinces provided a

3 For a more detailed discussion, see: Dai Yi 戴逸, *Qianlong di jiqi shidai 乾隆帝及其时代* [The Emperor Qianlong and his time] (Beijing: People's University Press, 1992), pp. 412–413.

geographical complexity that appealed to peasants and secret societies. In 1796, the White Lotus Society launched a huge rebellion in Hubei, dealing a heavy blow to Qing and which it took Qing's government nine years to defeat. Qing's brutal crackdown on the followers of the White Lotus teachings greatly intensified during this time. Consequently, the number of dispossessed and homeless people increased dramatically.

Meanwhile the British Empire intensified its efforts to smuggle opium into China, contributing to instability inside the country. China launched an anti-smuggling operation, which was as much a struggle against Britain's aggression as it was against the drug trade. Not hesitating to engage in war to achieve its goal of becoming an unchallengeable global hegemon, Britain dragged China into the whirlpool of global conflicts. Consequently, China's decline was inevitable.

British Opium Smuggling and Lin Zexu's Anti-Smuggling Endeavor

As early as the seventeenth century, Britain began purchasing tea, silk and porcelains from China and later bought Chinese cloth. British products in China, however, did not enjoy the same popularity. Nor did Britain have enough commodities to trade with China. Take tea and cloth, for example. The number of *dan* (a unit of weight) of tea imported by Britain's East India Company from China increased from 42,065 (from 1760 to 1764) to 235,840 (1830–1833).⁴ Essentially, the import increased six-fold in seven decades. Where the cloth trade between Britain and China was concerned, Britain's imports from China at the beginning of the 1830s were 386,364 *taels* of silver while China's imports from Britain were merely 246,189.⁵ Some indicated that within two years (1837–1839) of beginning trade with China,

Britain purchased 4.27 million pounds of Chinese goods and *legally* sold 0.91 million pounds of British products to China. Consequently, Britain developed a large trade deficit with China. Britain initially attempted to use its own supplies of silver to pay off the trade deficit which amounted to 3,300,000 pounds.⁶ However, in the 1770s, British traders began to replace silver with opium, essentially making opium smuggling the lifeline of Britain's trade with China.

There was a dramatic increase in opium smuggling into China (see table below) in the 1820s.

Years	Amount of Smuggled Opium (chests/p.a.)
1820–1824	(approximately) 8,000
1825–1829	12,576
1835–1838	35,445
1838–1839	(more than) 40,000

4 Xiao Zhizhi 萧致治, *Yapian zhanzheng shi* 鸦片战争史 [History of the Opium War] (Fuzhou: Fujian People's Publishing House, 1996), vol. 1, p. 131.

5 Yan Zhongping 严中平, Xu Yisheng 徐义生, Yao Xianhao 姚贤镐, Sun Yutang 孙毓棠, Wang Jingyu 汪敬虞, Nie Baozhang 聂宝璋, Li Wenzhi 李文治, Zhang Youyi 章有义, and Luo Ergang 罗尔纲, eds., *Zhongguo jindai jingjishi tongji ziliao xuanji* 中国近代经济史统计资料选辑 [Selected statistics in regard to the history of modern Chinese economy] (Beijing: Science Press, 1955), p. 13.

6 Yan Zhongping 严中平, et al., eds., *Zhongguo jindai jingjishi* 中国近代经济史 [History of modern Chinese economy, 1840–1894] (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1990), vol. 1, p. 18.