

# **The Interest in World Geography in 19th Century China and “Fundamental Information about the Russian State” by Lin Zexu**

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After the impressive naval expeditions of Zheng He (1371–1435) in the early Ming Dynasty, Chinese scholarship as a whole turned away from the outside world and devoted itself to introspection. But curiosity about the non-Chinese world could not be completely stifled. China by the nineteenth century required a timely, realistic, dependable, and detailed literature concerning the outside world and developments beyond China.

The middle of the nineteenth century was a crucial period in the history of China. It was a period of increasing contacts with Western countries – Great Britain, America, France, and Russia. These contacts were made with the active participation of European countries and passive attempts of China to resist the penetration of Western countries. The Opium Wars, which occurred from 1840–1850, struck a crippling blow to the Qing Empire.

Uncertainty about the unshakability of traditional Confucian postulates, which propagated the superiority of the "Middle Kingdom" over the "barbarian" countries, developed among the Chinese intelligentsia. Some of the most farsighted of the intelligentsia looked to the origins of Western countries' power. They began to investigate accessible information about the state structure, systems of economic administration, education, and the sources of their military power. They discovered that there were many things worth acquiring from "barbarians."

Confrontation with the Western countries during the first half of the nineteenth century jolted the Chinese into a more realistic perception of the wider world. Before the Opium Wars, the Chinese took little notice of the world beyond the traditional Chinese realm; during the course of the war, China's inadequate knowledge of overseas countries proved to be a strategic disadvantage. In the 1840s, knowledge of the wider world was important to China's defense against Western intrusion, and a handful of Chinese scholar-officials who shared this view engaged in the serious study of foreign nations. A small but influential group of Chinese set out to expand China's knowledge of the West; they did so in the belief that this was essential to China's survival. The comprehensive accounts put together by Lin Zexu 林 則徐 (1785–1850), Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1856),

and Xu Jiyu 徐繼審 (1795–1853), and shorter works by other authors suggested the importance of this new perspective.

China's "response to the West" is a major theme in modern Chinese history. This response was not a simple one, and Chinese knowledge of the West was often filtered through traditional concepts. The major elements of an ancient worldview still prevailed, even as the Chinese began to assimilate new knowledge regarding the West. For almost the entire eighteenth century, the intellectual climate of China was dominated by the so-called School of Han Learning. Scholars of this school avoided discussing politics and were devoted to philological study and textual criticism. The dominant position of the Han School was not shaken until the second quarter of the nineteenth century when the symptoms of dynastic decline became obvious and the scholar-officials began to be concerned about the political problems of their times.

The early nineteenth century saw the emergence of revived interest in the school of statecraft or "learning of practical use to society" [經世之用 *jing-shi zhi-yong*]. It flourished in the seventeenth century but, mainly due to the repressive policy of the Qianlong emperor (1736–1795) towards the literati class, was overshadowed by the school of scholasticism in the eighteenth century.

The reemergence of the statecraft school in the nineteenth century is evidenced by the revitalization of jin-wen 今文 or "Modern Text School" of classical learning, which laid stress on one's emotional need for moral commitment to bring peace and prosperity to state and society in a practical way.

An important scholar in this intellectual revival was Zhuang Cunyu 莊存與 (1719–1788), his grandson Liu Fenglu 劉逢祿 (1776–1829), the prolific writers Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 (1792–1841) and Bao Shichen 包世臣 (1775–1855), and the frontier expert Yao Ying 姚瑩 (1785–1853). This group also included Lin Zexu and Huang Juezi 黃爵滋, who were to play important roles in the Opium Wars, and Wei Yuan and Feng Guifen 馮桂芬 (1809–1874), who were later noted as reformers primarily interested in problems arising from China's relations with the West.

In the preface to Huang-chao jing-shi wen-bian 皇朝經世文編 [Collection of Qing Dynasty writings on statecraft], Wei Yuan set forth two basic approaches of the statecraft school: emphasis on the present, and stress on the importance of practical application.

One of the problems to which jing-shi scholars paid increasing attention was the frontier problem, concerning Inner Asia and the sea coast. With mounting Western incursions from the southeast coast, the second quarter of the nineteenth century saw a significant reorientation in the focus of Chinese statecraft – from Inner Asia to the maritime world, whence came "barbarians" with new technologies.

The early writings on maritime defense naturally focused on the Guangdong coast (Guang Tianpei, Liang Tingnan, Li Fuxiang). The overriding concern of some statecraft

literati-officials was to understand the maritime West. For Commissioner Lin Zexu, an effective way was through translation. Wei Yuan later suggested the establishment of an official translation institute. Guo Songtao's 郭嵩燾 (1818–1891) 1859 memorial proposed the creation of an official school for the teaching of foreign languages. Information was gathered on Western history, geography, law, and political conditions. Impressive as these works might be, it was the study of world geography that was to have the most considerable influence.



**Copy of the first page of Lin Zexu's work "Fundamental Information about the Russian State"**

This interest in world geography appeared on the surface to be directed towards obtaining knowledge of the unknown Western world, and indeed of the entire globe. But when we consider the urgent needs of the times, it can be seen as a movement to strengthen China's own knowledge and ability. In other words, a segment of Chinese officials and literati of the period, after a war with a barbarian state of Western Europe, urgently sought to understand the enemy and discover what kind of place Europe was. It was necessary to seek correct answers. Under this pressure, there was a surge of interest in world geography.

After 1840, the Chinese literati began gradually to pay more attention to the subject of world geography, and by the 1860s, more than twenty books had been written.

One of the persons who first applied knowledge gained from Western countries was an eminent state official, the scholar Lin Zexu. He has been honored and remembered for his resolute opposition to the opium trade and stiff resistance to foreign incursions. Also essential, in the author's opinion, is Lin's contribution to the development of Chinese social and political thought in the nineteenth century, and to the creation of a system of views and ideas about the vital necessity of using the achievements of Western science. The main ideas of this theory, which later was called the doctrine of learning "overseas

affairs," can be found in such works as "Gazetteer of the Four Continents" [Lin, 1], "Foreigners about China" [Lin, 3], "Macao Monthly" [Lin, 4], "Fundamental Information about the Russian State" [Lin, 2], etc.

Lin Zexu's work "Fundamental Information about the Russian State" has not yet attracted the attention of scholars. A unique wood block of this nineteenth-century work is kept now in the archive of Chinese manuscripts at the Library of the Institute of Oriental Studies (St. Petersburg branch), Russian Academy of Sciences. Lin Zexu wrote it while in Canton (1839–1841), where he was sent by order of the emperor as a state commissioner with plenipotentiary powers [欽差大臣]. There in the southern provinces of China, where the opium trade flourished most of all, the influence of Western countries and its penetration into China was immense.

Initially, "Fundamental Information about the Russian State" was included as an independent part in Lin's work "Gazetteer of the Four Continents," which, in its turn, became a section of a work by the prominent Chinese philosopher, poet, and historian Wei Yuan, *The Illustrated Gazetteer of Maritime Countries* [Wei, 6]. The main theme of his paper Wei described as follows:

"What is the purpose of the present work? Its purpose is to show how to use barbarians to fight barbarians, how to make the barbarians pacify one another (to our advantage), and how to employ the superior techniques of the barbarians in order to control them." [Wei, 6, 3rd ed. Preface: 1a]

Wei Yuan advocated the ancient idea of using "barbarians" to deal with barbarians and gave it a new dimension, that of learning from barbarians in order to resist and drive off barbarians, including the very same barbarians from whom the learning had come.

In 1882, Lin Zexu's "Fundamental Information about the Russian State," together with two works on Russia by high state official Yao Ying 姚瑩 (1785–1853), was published in China in the collection *Fundamental Information about Russia*.

Lin Zexu's appeal to Russia was not just casual. Tsarist Russia had an extensive mutual border with China and was of undoubtedly high interest to Qing rulers. Russia was not only a potentially useful tool against Britain and other Western countries, but also a key example of how a large but weak and poor country could be raised to parity with any European power by imitation and adoption of European industrial-military methods. He found that Peter the Great, a popular example for later Chinese modernizers, and even the notoriously lewd, but talented Catherine II had recognized the usefulness of learning the skills of other peoples. Consequently, Russia had become powerful. This was a potent argument for the self-strengtheners of a later day.

Publication of the manuscript at the beginning of the 1880s was natural. The second half of the nineteenth century gave a "second birth" to the above-mentioned works of Lin Zexu, Wei Yuan, and Xu Jiyu, because the first appearance of their works was not marked by attention from Chinese society. Their writings essentially influenced the

development of social thought in Japan during the Meiji Restoration [明治維新] and stirred up the whole generation of Sakuma Shozan 佐久間象山 (1811–1864), Ioshida Shoin 吉田松陰 (1830–1859), Saigo Takamori 西郷隆盛 (1827–1877). In spite of the fact that the works first emerged in China, interest towards them was revealed first in Japan, and only in the second half of the nineteenth century did the Chinese intelligentsia show its concern.

Only during the 1860s, signified by the attempts of Chinese officials to put into life the so-called policy of self-strengthening, was interest in Western countries, and therefore in the works where these countries were described, stimulated.

Chinese historians have determined one of the main sources that Lin Zexu used while creating his works on Western countries: H. Murray, *The Encyclopedia of Geography* [5]. Published in the first half of the nineteenth century, it offered the latest information about the whole world.

Lin Zexu's work was not a literal translation of the source material. One of the main tasks of Lin's work was to show the contemporary power of Russia and try to investigate its origins. As a whole, the manuscript gives a brief description of the Russian Empire divided into regions with inner and outer borders, the quantity of military forces within each region, climate-specific features, religious confessions, local crafts, customs of the inhabitants, some historical issues, etc.

Despite numerous errors in geographic assertions, in political or in historical sequence, the work presented a world of distinct individual nations, with variation in habits, society, and technological progress.

The problem of the perception of Russia from abroad is significant because it allows on the one hand the origins, formation, and current evolution of the image of Russia to be traced; on the other hand, it broadens the horizons of understanding of its domestic history and the history of foreign countries as well. It also helps to clear up some episodes in the history of Russia-Chinese relations.

It is worth mentioning that "Fundamental Information" is one of the first manuscripts published in China that was wholly devoted to the description of Russia.

The historical role of the above-mentioned progressive representatives of social thought of nineteenth-century China goes considerably beyond the period of their activity. Their positive influence on contemporaries and on the social thought of subsequent generations, though studied insufficiently, is generally recognized. They were the first, being in an extremely unfavorable situation of Anglo-Chinese conflict, to show an interest in the outside world, in the scientific and technological achievements of the West, and became opponents of the policy of isolation.

The phenomenon of Lin Zexu was that in a critical period of Chinese history, being at the epicenter of Anglo-Chinese conflict and working mainly from the point of view of Confucian philosophy, he could leave behind some of the traditional stereotypes and

soberly evaluate the scientific and technological superiority of foreigners ("barbarians"). He understood that to withstand foreign invasion, China would have to assimilate and master the achievements of Western science.

Modern historians studying the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China (which includes the active development of international commerce and incorporation of the Chinese economy into the international labor force) cite the men discussed above as pioneers in this subject.

Additional analysis of life and activity of outstanding representatives of the social and political thought of mid-nineteenth-century China allows for a more complete understanding of the general processes of development of Chinese social and political thought, which in turn greatly influenced the social development of Asian countries.

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