

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

By Sergey Vradiy

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 primarily to introspection. But curiosity about the non-Chinese world could not be completely stifled. China by the nineteenth century required timely current, realistic, 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 increased contacts with Western countries – namely, Great Britain, the United States, France and Russia. These contacts were made with the active participation of European countries and passive attempts by China to resist the penetration of Western countries. The “opium” wars, which occurred from 1840-1850, struck a crippling blow to the Qing dynasty.

Uncertainty about the unshakability of traditional Confucian postulates, which propagated the superiority of the “Middle Kingdom” over the “barbarian” countries, developed among Chinese intellectuals. Some of the most farsighted of the intellectual class explored the origins and power of Western countries. They began to investigate the 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 which were worth acquiring from “barbarians.”

Confrontation with the West during the first half of the nineteenth century jolted the Chinese into a more realistic perception of the wider world. Before the Opium War, 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 徐繼畲 (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 had been dominated by the so-called School of Han Learning. The scholars of this school avoided discussing politics and were devoted to the study of philosophy 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 time.

The early nineteenth century saw the reemergence of interest in the school of statecraft or “learning of practical use to society” 經世之用 *jing-shi zhi-yong*. It had flourished in the seventeenth century but, mainly due to the repressive policy of the Qianlong Emperor (1736-1795) towards the intellectual class, was overshadowed by the school of scholasticism in the eighteenth century.

The re-emergence of the statecraft school in the nineteenth century was 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 (1793-1853), who were to play important roles in the Opium War, and Wei Yuan and Feng Guifen 馮桂芬 (1809-1874), who later were noted as reformers primarily interested in the 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 south-east 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 a new technology.

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

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

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 understanding and mastering the achievements of Western science. The main ideas of this theory, which was later called the doctrine of learning "overseas affairs," can be found in Lin's "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 attracted the attention of scholars yet. A unique wood block of this nineteenth century work is keeping now in the archive of Chinese manuscripts at the Library of Institute of Oriental Manuscripts (former St. Petersburg branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, 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 Wei's paper is 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 interest in Russia was not just casual. Tsarist Russia had an extensive mutual border with China and was undoubtedly an area of concern for the 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 of Russia 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.

The publication of the manuscript in the beginning of 1880s was natural. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a “second birth” of the above mentioned works of Lin Zexu, Wei Yuan, Xu Jiyu, because the first appearance of their works received sparse 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 a whole generation of Japanese intellectuals like Sakuma Shozan 佐久間象山 (1811-1864), Ioshida Shoin 吉田松陰 (1830-1859), and Saigo Takamori 西郷隆盛 (1827-1877). In spite of the fact that the works first emerged in China, the interest towards it was revealed previously in Japan, and only in the second half of the nineteenth century did Chinese intellectuals give it any serious attention.

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

Chinese historians have determined one of the main sources which Lin Zexu used while creating his works on Western countries: H. Murray, *The Encyclopedia of Geography* [5]. Published in the first half of the 19th 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 its 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.

Lin's work is significant. On the one hand, it allowed China to trace the origins, formation, and current evolution of the image of Russia; and on the other hand, it broadened the horizons of understanding of domestic history and the history of foreign countries as well. It also helped 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 which 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 among the first to show an interest in the outside world, in the scientific and technological achievements of the West, and became opponents to the policy of isolation.

The phenomenon of Lin Zexu was that in a crucial period of Chinese history, being in 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 Peoples 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 the lives and activities of these 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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