Prologue & Acknowledgements

The beginning of a new era is usually connected with economic, social and political restructuring and progress of a society. In Europe for instance, the beginning of the modern era was marked by the French Revolution in 1789 or the start of the Industrial Revolution during the late eighteenth century. But in China, the modern era started with an event that has been spoken of as the most severe humiliation in Chinese history, that is, the Opium War in 1840. The Chinese government was defeated by a Western power for the first time.[1]

It was not only the war itself, but also the dramatic occurrences thereafter, such as defeats against Japan, the opening of the "treaty ports" and the division of the country into the "spheres of influence" etc., that repeatedly showcased China's powerless status. Till date, the period from 1840 to the foundation of the Peoples Republic of China in 1949 is defined as the century of "Semi-Colony and Semi-Feudal Society (半封建半殖民地社会)" in historical textbooks in China. However, in Western historiographies, this period is not interpreted in a negative manner. It was with the war in 1840 that China gradually began to open up and enter the family of nations.

Regardless of how the year 1840 is interpreted and how the new era in Chinese history began, a central understanding that is shared by both Chinese and Western historiography is that of China's isolation before 1840 and the process of opening up thereafter. Certain policies such as the "sea ban (海禁)" and the limited foreign trade during the Ming and Qing Dynasties had obviously contributed to this aspect of isolation. All attempts by Europeans to communicate with China as equals, including the famous Macartney Mission in 1793, had failed. Besides the official missions, many other Western travelers who had been to China, confirmed in their writings how "blocked" and "obstructed" Chinese

1 The discussion regarding the periodization of Chinese history has not been completed yet. Chinese historians of late Qing Dynasty like *Liang Qichao* (梁启超 1873–1929) defined the end of the reign of emperor Qianlong by the end of eighteenth century as the beginning of the Chinese modern era. However, the arrival of the Portuguese and Spanish in South China during the sixteenth century has been a preferred event to denote the beginning of the modern era by historians such as *Lü Simian* (吕思勉), *Qian Mu* (钱穆) as well as some Western Sinologists such as Frederic Wakeman (1937–2006) and Jonathan Spence. But since the 1930s and 1940s, the Opium War of 1839–1842, often referred to as the year 1840, was viewed by a majority of both Chinese and Western historians as the most important temporal boundary in China's recent past. Chinese historians settled upon this date out of a patriotic concern with the issue of foreign imperialism. For the Western historians, the year 1840 marked the beginning of Western impact and thus the best starting point for their study of modern China. Cf.: Wang, "Maritime China in Transition," 3. Cohen, *Discovering History in China*, 191.

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society was.[2] In this sense, 1840 was undoubtedly a turning point in Chinese history because Westernization characterized much of Chinese history after 1840, and in some way continues to do so even today.

Despite this widespread understanding about China, there are studies showing that the opposite was true, especially in the last three decades: Despite the apparent isolation, some parts of China, especially coastal areas, were connected to the world outside during the time before the Opium War.[3] Canton for instance, was famously indispensable in global trade long before 1840. Through Canton, China was actively involved in the intercontinental trade of metal and merchandise since the sixteenth century. In fact, the reduction of silver production in South America during the early nineteenth century actually caused an increase in the opium trade in China.[4] As Osterhammel once noted, it was in large part thanks to China that the East India Company became the biggest commercial organization in the world at the time, since China's exports helped provide the Chancellor of Great Britain a tenth of his revenue during that period: Could a country with this immense an impact be considered entirely "isolated"?[5]

Besides commercial aspects, China also had its channels open in cultural and political exchange: Peking, for example, was an oriental capital city that had frequent contact with Europe. Beside the official diplomatic missions, over a hundred Jesuits had visited Peking during the eighteenth century. Furthermore, at least 17 missionaries had spent a significant period of their lives in Peking.[6] They were not only missionaries, but also researchers, diplomats, translators, civil and personal servants of the Chinese emperors. The position of the leading officer of the imperial astronomy institution (钦天监监正) was held almost continuously by European Jesuits from the mid-seventeenth century till at least 1826, because the western calendar was preferred for astronomical calculations.[7]

More importantly, through their diligence and talents in languages and science, these missionaries not only translated, but also composed numerous works about China for European readers, which became foundational materials for the emergence of Sinophile during the period of Enlightenment.[8] Conversely, what

2 Porter, "A Peculiar but Uninteresting Nation," 181.

3 Cf.: Liang, *A misunderstood China*, 23–41.

4 Lin, *China Upside Down*, 60 and 103.

5 Osterhammel, *China und die Weltgesellschaft*, 127.

6 Ouyang, "The Hidden Danger in the Flourishing Age," 103.

7 Zhang and Wu, *History of Cultural Relation between China and the West*, 499. See also: Huang, "The combat of power," 75–91.

8 Take the Jesuits' works as example: Between 1552 and 1687, Jesuits in China produced 69 Sinological works by 28 authors. These numbers increased significantly during the period

they brought from Europe to the court in Peking was not only a large number of books translated into Chinese,[9] but also merchandise and various products that were newly developed in Europe. It was well known that clocks, weapons, musical instruments and other small mechanical inventions were of enormous interest to the Chinese emperors.[10] In other words, during the decades or even centuries preceding the year 1840, the capital city of an "isolated" country and the surroundings of its emperors did not seem to be isolated.

Therefore, considering the contradictory data regarding the theory of isolation, this book first delves into the question of how open China was before 1840. The different facets of China's encounters with the West, particularly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, makes for a great beginning to investigate this question.

There were visible "Western elements" or internationality during the period, including a substantial number of objects and knowledge that were exchanged, i.e. translated books, machines, instruments, artworks etc. Taking science and technology as an example: During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Jesuits had brought 23 kinds of devices into the palace.[11] Emperor Kangxi (康熙, reg.1660–1720) had four Jesuits working for him to construct and repair various devices such as clocks, telescopes, microscopes, weapons, music boxes and so on. The clocks were favored objects with almost every Qing emperor. However, these devices were not revered or considered to be a sign of the superiority of Europe in technology. Europe was not considered to be a potential military danger to China. Only under special and urgent circumstances were these new inventions used. For example, cannons constructed by Jesuits were used during wartimes.[12] Once these weapons and other machines had rendered their services, there was no interest for further research on them.

Therefore, instead of investigating the status of technology and its developments in Europe, the machines and devices were accepted in a pragmatic way. They were not considered for any long term benefits they might offer nor used for

from 1687 to 1773, as the Jesuits in China produced 353 Sinological works by 55 authors. Cf.: Ouyang, The Hidden Danger in the Flourishing Age," 40.

9 During the two centuries after the Jesuit, Matteo Ricci's arrival in China around 1582, at least 437 European works were translated, including books on religion, geography, philosophy, astronomy, machinery construction etc. Cf.: Zhang and Wu, *History of Cultural Relation between China and the West*, 496.

10 Zhang and Wu, *History of Cultural Relation between China and the West*, 525.

11 Zhang and Wu, *History of Cultural Relation between China and the West*, 509.

12 Zhang and Wu, *History of Cultural Relation between China and the West*, 520–523 and Ouyang, Zhesheng 2014, 108.

society.[13] Just like the clocks and music boxes which only served to entertain the emperors and privileged Chinese, information and knowledge from the West remained mostly in the palace or within a very limited circle. The majority of Chinese stayed ignorant and uninformed about new technology and inventions.[14]

Besides this pragmatic manner of profiting from the advantages of the West, another aspect of China's confrontation was the intellectual theory about "the Chinese origin of Western culture (西学中源)", which emerged around the seventeenth century, as contact with the West became more frequent through missionaries.[15] This theory made it comfortable for Chinese intellectuals or literati[16] to face the West, especially considering their advancements in scientific areas, without denting their self-confidence and the sovereignty of Chinese culture in their imagined world. During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), emperor Kangxi, who was interested in Western science, supported the theory that asserted "the Chinese origin of Western culture". In 1711, after taking mathematic lessons from the Jesuits, Kangxi even claimed that algebra originally came from China.[17] Under his reign, the theory of "Chinese origin of Western culture" was promoted and became the standard way in which Chinese literati dealt with the West. This tradition continued to dominate intellectual thought up to the late nineteenth century. Also the leading theory of the "Self-Strengthening Movement (洋务运动)" after 1840 proposed by Zhang Zhidong (张之洞 1837–1909) – "Chinese learning for fundamental principles and Western learning for practical application (中学为体，西学为用)" – reflected both the pragmatic and self-confident manner in which Chinese intellectuals had encounters with the West.

Unlike most of the Chinese outside privileged circles who barely had information about the outside world, some Chinese literati including the emperors of the period had opportunities to experience Western culture. However, their discussions were not about the advantages of Western culture, but rather about the "Chinese origin" of aspects they had experienced so that they could stake legitimate claim on the predominance of Chinese culture. These characteristics of the Chinese way of facing the West – pragmatism and self-confidence – did not prevent contact with the West, but made the confrontation almost fruitless

13 Zhang and Wu, *History of Cultural Relation between China and the West*, 509–510.

14 The lack of information was only one of the various reasons leading to the ignorant and uninformed state of Chinese people of the time. Besides, the year 1840 did not change this characteristic of the people.

15 Zhang and Wu, *History of Cultural Relation between China and the West*, 510–512.

16 Literati in this book are referred to the Confucian intellectuals especially those who became scholar-bureaucrats.

17 Zhang and Wu, *History of Cultural Relation between China and the West*, 513.

because there is no proof of any part of Western culture having brought a qualitative and profound change in Chinese society.

However, on the European side, this encounter turned out to be quite different. The exchange between China and Europe since the seventeenth century was obviously asymmetrical: While the flow of information from China increased enormously in Europe, the Chinese were even less informed about Europe in 1820 than a hundred years before.[18] Considering this asymmetry in the exchange of information, China's openness had a superficial quality rather than a profound and long term type of exchange. In this case, the aspect of isolation seems to be more plausible.

Nevertheless, Peking was not the only location of encounters between China and the West. The emperors and the privileged social class were not the only Chinese who experienced Western culture. Besides the missionaries and diplomats in Peking, there was another group of Westerners living in China, namely the European and American merchants in Canton. As mentioned before, through foreign trade in Canton, China was actively involved in world trade long before 1840. Moreover, unlike in the capital city, where the openness of China was observed only among emperors or the privileged social class, in Canton, it was the Chinese merchants who got in touch with the outside world in their daily lives.

This book endeavors to examine China's openness or isolation through an additional perspective, that of the merchants in Canton. Since the Cantonese merchants did not belong to the privileged circle of Chinese society, they had a different position and worldview comparing to that of the literati. Although they were very successful in foreign trade considering the volume of trade they managed and the financial contributions that they made, their social standing was not equal to that of the literati. Regardless, they were the real pioneers at the forefront during conflicts between China and the West. Due to their position and social role as merchants, their contact with the West was based on personal relationships rather than official diplomacy. Conversely, unlike the Jesuits at the imperial courts, the Westerners in Canton did not see the Chinese empire in all its glory, but rather saw the nuanced and real social lives of merchants and other Chinese outside privileged circles.

In this context, the openness of China is observed in this book in an intercontinental commercial atmosphere and through the social networks of the Chinese merchants. This openness includes not only a "traditional" Chinese

18 Ouyang, "The Hidden Danger in the Flourishing Age", 104. Osterhammel, *China und die Weltgesellschaft*, 128.

aspect, but also an intercultural aspect. How did the Chinese merchants behave in their encounters with the West? How did they conduct their relationships in their Chinese circles? Due to the strong influence of foreign trade in the daily lives in Canton as well as the profound heritage of Confucian thought, how open were the Chinese merchants?

This book seeks to analyze not only a history of commerce, but also a history of Chinese society and intercultural confrontation and encounters before 1840. Through the details of daily lives collated from various sources, this book also reconstructs the social life and especially the struggle of a group of extraordinary Chinese, who played an indispensable role in the opening of China, but were never the focus of Chinese history up to now.

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