

Opium War and Foreign Encroachment: The Rise of New Rhetoric and Concepts

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The Opium War or the Anglo-Chinese war of 1839-42 is considered to be the most significant turning point in Chinese history as it is the first major confrontation between China and the Western world. Prior to Opium war in early 18th century the foreign trade was in China's favor. Between 1781 to 1810, 26 million tales of silver flowed to China, however after that the balance began to slip other way. ¹ Opium made its way to China in 7th or 8th century, however it was mainly used as medicine, opium-smoking for pleasure began to spread in China from the 17th century² and it resulted in serious sociopolitical menace. Initially Qing government anticipated that they can easily deal with the imperialist power and can ban the Opium trade. They took necessary step to stop the importation of Opium, there were serious discussions and deliberation among the Qing officials on how to handle this crisis. However, Qing government failed to deal with the imperialist power and eventually culminated the Opium war in 1840. The Qing government could not fight back and the military, technological and political weaknesses of the Qing Empire got exposed. Imperialist power gradually sapped the strength of the Chinese people who used to consider themselves as the most powerful race on the earth and Qing government became dysfunctional in front of the imperialist power. There are many academic articles and accounts on socio-political aspect of Opium War. Looking into the economic aspect, after the defeat in the Opium war, China had to sign the unequal treaty of Nanjing and had to hand over Hong Kong to imperialist power as war indemnities. Besides that the imperialist power also demanded six million US dollar, reopening

¹ Immanuel C.Y.Hsu, The Rise of Modern China , Oxford University Press, 1990

² The Opium Wars in China, accessed on 17th March 2023 at <https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/62962/1/Block-2.pdf>

of Canton as war indemnities. The economic consequences of Opium war has also been well researched by scholars and academicians. However no such research has been done on the linguistics aspect of the War. This article intends to probe how Opium War gave rise nationalistic sentiments, new ideas and concepts and how these new ideas and concepts are spelled out adding new slogans and eloquence to the language system.

The Chinese society and the people, like any other ancient Asiatic societies, have been proved to be very conservative and traditional with strong cultural beliefs and ideas cultivated for many generations that may be traced to the pre-Christian and pre-historic period. Being partially secluded from the rest of the world by its natural boundary, it has civilizational isolation from others. It developed and flourished independently in a unique way, thus whatever changes occurred in the Chinese language till the mid-19th century was mainly constrained to domestic causes. This has also made them quite proud about their past and established superiority complex as one would like to claim based on their civilization. The Chinese people had a conviction that they are superior to all others in all respect. Hence they used to believe that others must learn the cultured behavior and conduct from the esteemed classical scriptures of the Confucian era. However, this self-aggrandized and much-lauded cultural superiority got shattered and the so-called strong cultural edifice built so assiduously by the generations of saints and sages crumble down with the ignominious defeat of the Middle Kingdom in the Anglo-Chinese war and in other successive wars which forced the imperial authorities to sign a series of unequal treaties with the Western powers for the survival of their regimes. All these led to the growth of serious consternation in the minds of patriotic intellectuals and no sooner questions against the efficacy and viability of the traditional belief system were raised. The young, learned scholars of that time tried to find out the flaws of the Chinese side after being defeated in the Opium war. In the process of finding Chinese flaws and Britisher's strong point, the Chinese people came to know about many new technologies. Under such cumulative social pressure, the imperialists were forced to learn the barbarian's military technology in limited ways and fashions with lots of reservations. This led to the leaning of the Western language and culture that include various philosophical ideas and concepts, Western social science theories and newly developed scientific and technological views against various

ancient beliefs and traditions by the Chinese students in the midst of various raging controversies between the conservative and the progressive faction of the then Chinese scholarly world. Thus the “New Thought Movement” in China is believed to have started around this time (1840-1842). Initially, the New Thought Movement was neither a well-organized ideological movement under the leadership of any person nor under the banner of any political doctrine and belief. Some learned scholars expressed out their scattered patriotic ideas and thoughts for national security. Their ideas however have undergone different stages of further perfection and improvement and have coagulated in the form of certain political doctrine. A minute study showed that the different shades of ideas and thoughts that emerged in this period had a nationalistic and patriotic flavor in them. The zeal to withstand the imperialist power became quite conspicuous through new emerging expressions. The new ideas and thoughts evolved out from certain socio-historical conditions created by various factors and forces of society.

Immediately after the Opium War the intellectuals of the then period launched “洋务运动” (yángwù yùndòng). 洋务运动 (yángwù yùndòng) the Chinese character “洋”(yang) means “foreign”, “务”(wù) means “to be engaged in” and “运动”(yùndòng) has the meaning of the movement. Thus the whole word “洋务运动” (yángwù yùndòng) means “the movement against the foreigners”. The movement was launched and triggered when China incurred costly defeat in the Opium war and its technological backwardness got exposed. The defeat was clear evidence that China is not the superior power and need to strengthen its strength in order to deal with Western Powers. From the beginning, China had little or no contact with the outside world. They are geographically isolated and intentionally used to keep themselves away from the outside world thinking they are superior among all. Geographically the dry, harsh desert, rugged mountains in the North and West and the Pacific Ocean in the East formed a natural boundary for China to keep its civilization isolated from others. Thus, it developed and flourished independently in a unique way in the Yellow River and Yang Zi River valley. Though this civilization grew at one corner of the earth, yet the Chinese all along firmly believed that they are located at the center, and thereby they named their country “Zhōngguó” which means “Middle Kingdom” in English. The geographical barrier was a natural

physical restriction for foreigners to come to China, but Chinese people also intentionally made many strict policies that also kept the foreigners away from the middle kingdom. The Chinese people used to consider themselves far superior to all others thus they felt that any foreigner wishing to have a court with the emperor must be willing to koutou, or "lie prostrate and make nine knocks off the head on the floor" before him. ³Since most foreigners were unwilling to koutou because of their own self-esteem and prestige, the scope of having trade with China used to get canceled automatically. It was during this same time, in the 1300's when Westerners began traveling to China, "foreign devil" (洋鬼子 yángguǐzi) was coined. Later the term lost its significance but again in the 19th century when Britain engaged in the opium trade with China, Chinese people again started using the same term for British people. They strongly abused the British people considering them to be pirates who had come to carry away their wealth, to filch from them their land, and to overturn their country. This impression was crystallized in the expression 'foreign devil'. The intellectuals soon realized that in order to effectively deal with the 'foreign devils' they need to learn Westerners tricks and methods and launched slogan as "Learn or use barbarian methods to combat barbarian threats" (以夷制夷 yǐyízhìyí). The slogan itself rankled and intensified the call for changes. The linguistics analysis of the slogan "以夷制夷": "以" (yǐ) carries the meaning of "use", "夷" (yí) means "non-Han people or Barbarians", "制" (zhì) means "to control or to combat". China made several efforts to study Western science and technologies. Besides learning Western science and technologies, China also wanted to undergo social reforms. New ideologies, philosophy, culture also need to be adopted to keep pace with the modern world. Thus, the movement is popularly known as The Westernization Movement or Self Strengthening Movement. It is the first modernization movement that promoted modernization in China. The movement failed because it did not get full-fledged support from the then Qing government. The Qing leaders were in full support of military and economic modernization but reluctant for any forms of social and political changes. After the introduction of military, technological and economic modernization the upper class and upper-middle class gained wealth from manufacturing industries and the working class lived in poverty.⁴ The economic

³ Melissa F. Drewry, Life as a "Foreign Devil" in China, p-3

⁴ <http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/21cc/utopia/methods1/bourgeoisie1/bourgeoisie.html>

differences bought social layers. The property owning class became the capitalist bourgeoisie and working-class people became the proletariat. The proletariats were mercilessly exploited by the capitalist bourgeoisie, and they grew beneath the Capitalist bourgeoisie society. The Capitalist bourgeoisie also owned factories and proletariats work in those factories and create great wealth for the Capitalist bourgeoisie. The proletariats class are those people do not possess their own property hence the Chinese terminologies of proletariats is “无产阶级”, “无” (wú) means no or not, “产” (chǎn)means property, “阶级” (jiējí)is class. The word “proletariat” originated in Britain in the outbreak of the Industrial Revolution in 1760. At that time the concept of industry made an entry into society. A new type of social change was taking place in civil society. The industrial revolution gained full momentum in Europe in the 1800 and 1900. Industrial Revolution was at its peak in Europe; the oriental countries including India and China were unaware of it. It was not Industrial Revolution, but Opium War introduced China to foreign investment and modern technologies.

公车上书 (gōngchē shàngshū- Public vehicle petition) China’s defeat in the first Sino-Japanese war in 1894 forced China to sign the unequal treaty of Shimonoseki which ceded Taiwan and Liaodong to Japan in perpetuity, and imposed reparation obligations of 200 million taels of silver on China.⁵ At that time the civil service examination was going on, when the news of the unequal treaty reached, the aspirants became annoyed, especially the aspirants of Taiwan, as their own land will be a part of Japan very soon. Under such circumstances, the examinees of civil service examination under the leadership of Kang Youwei signed a petition to the Qing emperor to withdraw the unequal treaty. The Chinese name “公车上书” (gōngchē shàngshū) means “public vehicle petition”. “公车” (gōngchē)means “public vehicle” and “上书” (shàngshū) means “to present petition”. In the imperial era, the poetic names of examinees of civil service examination were known as “公车” (public vehicle) as they were transported to the capital by public transport freely. When the petition was signed at that time also examinees of civil service examination from parts of the countries were brought to

⁵ <http://www.theinfolist.com/php/SummaryGet.php?FindGo=Gongche%20Shangshu%20movement>

the capital, hence the movement is also famously known as “public vehicle movement”.

兴中会 (xīng zhōng huì Revive Chinese society) Revive Chinese society is the first revolutionary organization founded by Sun Yet-sen in Hawaii in the year 1894. China’s defeat in the first Sino-Japanese exposed the incompetence and inability of the Qing government. Sun Yet-sen, one of the progressive leaders of that time established this society to restore China’s sovereignty by overthrowing the Qing government. The anti-Qing Organization was a platform for carrying out further revolutionaries’ activities in the future. He plotted an uprising to capture Canton, but it failed, soon he fled to the West in exile. In the West, he talked to people gathered some ideas, started raising money to lay a strong foundation for the Revive Chinese society. In the meantime, he encouraged more people to join the organization and later merged Furen Literary Society with his society. In 1895, Revive Chinese society again attempted to launch an uprising in Guangzhou, but plans were leaked, and thus again the uprising proved to be a failure. The Revive Chinese Society again formed an alliance in 1900 with Brothers and Elders society and got a new name “Revive Han Society”.⁶ Sun was nominated as the new leader of the newly formed society. Soon started the uprising in Huizhou, which again failed. Repeated failures gave him even more strength and thus he established the Republic of China. The character “兴” (xīng) bears a meaning of “begin or promote”, “中” (zhōng) means “China” and “会” (huì) means “society or organization”.

门户开放政策 (ménhù kāifàng zhèngcè The open-door policy) John Hey, the then Secretary of State put forward the “open door” policy in late 19th Century. The Chinese character “门户” (ménhù) means “Gate or door”, “开放” (kāifàng) means “to open” and “政策” (zhèngcè) is “policy”. In late 18th century and early 19th century was the age of Imperialism and Western countries were engrossed in the thought of expanding their colonies across the world. China’s heavy population and rich market lured the Western Imperialists to establish control over China. Most of the Western powers were trying hard to exert control over China. In order to avoid one countries’ dominance over China, the policy was adopted. Under this policy, no

⁶ Kenneth Pletcher ,The History of China, p 253, Rosen Publishing House.

one country will have dominance over China and thus provides equal opportunity to all the western powers to have trade with China. At the same time, Chinese government was also free to regulate trade and create tariffs as per the country's needs.

Another very interesting fact that was noticed in the late Qin dynasty is the introduction of Social Darwinism (社会达尔文主义 shèhuì dá'ěrwén zhǔyì) in China by Yan Fu. China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese war (1894-95) was a shock to the Chinese because just before entering the war China had successfully completed its self-strengthening movement in (1864-1865) which aimed to make China to gain power gain after the defeat in the Opium War. Again, after their defeat in the hands of the Japanese, Chinese people realized that Chinese guns are not enough to win over the outside power but also need to learn other elements like diplomatic representations. Yan Fu⁷ went one step ahead and introduced social Darwinism in China. Social Darwinism is the societal analysis of Charles Darwin's idea of evolution. Many social scientists tried to apply it in human society. According to social Darwinism, only the strong would survive and the weak will perish. Yan Fu further stated that China needs to change to survive otherwise it will be eliminated. According to Social Darwinism China is left behind because it did not follow the universal pattern of change. This means China did not change from a traditional ancient empire to a modern empire. Two new concepts thus introduced are:

1. Struggle
2. Change (something new)

In such a socio-political atmosphere the word "New" (新 xīn) became a crucial component of a cluster of new words formed in the late Qin Dynasty and Republican era, 新妇女 (xīnfùnǚ), 维新运动 (wéixīn yùndòng), 新文化运动 (xīn wénhuà yùndòng), 新文学 (xīn wénxué), 新青年 (xīn qīngnián), 新政 (xīnzhèng) deserves special mention.

⁷ Yan Fu was a Chinese military officer, and great translator, and writer of late Qing dynasty. He was the first Chinese person to introduce the teachings of the West to China systematically, including Darwin's "natural selection".

Thus, we can see how nationalist sentiments developed in the minds of the common Chinese people against the Western Power. The defeat in the Opium war was a cultural shock to the Chinese people as their long pride was going to break. It was also to be noted that China was never fully colonized by the Western Powers. The Chinese people boldly faced external force and thus could finally emerge from the humiliation. Their agony and anti-Britisher sentiments got reflected through the new terminologies that emerged in that period. However, this change was not quickly felt or observed even by the speakers themselves. Saussure and Bloomfield have also said that language change is a subconscious process. It cannot be quickly felt or observed even by the speakers themselves. Similarly the changes that have occurred or the new terminologies added to the Chinese language system after the Opium are worth studying.

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