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978-1-107-06987-9 — The Qing Empire and the Opium War

Mao Haijian , Translated by Joseph Lawson , Peter Lavelle , Craig Smith , Introduction by Julia Lovell
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The Qing Empire and the Opium War

The Opium War of 1839–42, the first military conflict to take place between China and the West, is a subject of enduring interest. Mao Haijian, one of the most distinguished historians working in China, presents the culmination of more than ten years of research in this revisionist reading of the conflict and its main Chinese protagonists. Mao examines the Qing participants in terms of the moral standards and intellectual norms of their own time, demonstrating that actions which have struck later observers as ridiculous can be understood as reasonable within their context. This English-language translation of Mao's work offers a comprehensive response to the question of why the Qing Empire was so badly defeated by the British in the first Opium War; an answer that is distinctive and original within both Chinese and Western historiography, and supported by a wealth of hitherto unknown detail.

MAO HAIJIAN is professor of History at Macao University and East China Normal University. His books and essays have won numerous prizes, and include several monographs on the Hundred Days' Reform of 1898, a further monograph on the Opium Wars; and a biography of the Xianfeng emperor.

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The Qing Empire and the Opium War

The Collapse of the Heavenly Dynasty

Mao Haijian

East China Normal University and Macao University

With an introduction by Julia Lovell

English text edited by Joseph Lawson

Translated by Joseph Lawson, Craig Smith
and Peter Lavelle



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Translator's Preface

This book is the most detailed history of the First Opium War ever written, but also a book about ideas. The Chinese title is *Tianchao de bengkui*, which is “The Collapse of the Heavenly Dynasty” with the normal rendering of those terms. This is difficult in English, however, because it suggests that the book will be about the collapse of Qing rule, something that did not happen until 70 years after the Opium War, and nor does the author claim that the war inevitably led to the Qing government’s demise. It is significant that the proper noun in the title is “Heavenly Dynasty” (*Tianchao*), not “Qing Empire” or “China.” The book is about the idea of the “Heavenly Dynasty” and its *bengkui* (collapse, failure, or catastrophe). The author’s view is that the conception of sovereignty embodied in the idea of a *Tianchao* structured the Qing dynasty’s interaction with the world and led to some of the problems responsible for the military catastrophe in the Opium War, which, in turn, fatally undermined the credibility of this understanding of sovereignty.

The *Tian* in *Tianchao* is translated here as “Heaven” for the sake of consistency with the vast majority of Western scholarship. The idea of the *Tianchao* was that the imperial household were bearers of a Heavenly mandate to rule. According to Mao Haijian, there were no geographical limits to this mandate: “The idea of the Heavenly Dynasty meant that China was not just a part of the world; it *was* the world.”

Mao Haijian’s focus on the idea of the “Heavenly Dynasty” might strike readers of recent Western scholarship as old-fashioned. In the past two decades, Western scholars have argued that the Qing was a “sophisticated early modern, colonial empire,”¹ and its officials were “impelled by reasoning not fundamentally different from that guiding the assumptions of their British counterparts.”² Not trusting imperial proclamations to convey emperors’

¹ The quotation is from C. Patterson Giersch, though it reflects the consensus view of Western scholars who work on the Qing today. C. Patterson Giersch, “A Motley Throng: Social Change on Southwest China’s Early Modern Frontier,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 60, no. 1 (2001): 71.

² Matthew Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy: The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 11.

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real views of the world has become a standard part of the methodology of Western scholarship on China. Joanna Waley-Cohen, for example, argues that the Qianlong emperor's famous claim to Lord Macartney that "we have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your country's [i.e. Britain's] manufactures" was really only a "piece of propaganda directed at a domestic audience."³ In light of such studies, Qing claims to universal authority might be more readily interpreted as rhetorical – aimed at boosting the prestige of the emperor rather than as actual belief in universal sovereignty.

Proposing a gap between propaganda and real intent or mentality does not eliminate the problem of mentality, so much as force scholars to turn to actions and contexts for clues as to how the Qing government really saw the world. By examining what Qing emperors did, rather than what they said, Waley-Cohen projects the aim of the mid-late-nineteenth century Self-Strengthening Movement much further back in Chinese history: since at least the seventeenth century "The Chinese have consistently sought to absorb Western practical technical skills while remaining inimical to Western ideologies."⁴ Here again there is a big clash with Mao Haijian's work. It is beyond the scope of this preface to speculate about who is right. But it should be noted that Mao is by no means unskeptical about the use of language or the importance of context. Large sections of this book are devoted to showing how what officials wrote to the throne was fiction that bore no semblance of reality, and the book also considers the importance of translation mistakes in correspondence from the British in shaping the Daoguang emperor's response to the war. Yet Mao Haijian's view is that the idea of the *Tianchao* and universal sovereignty really did define the range of possibilities available to Qing governors. Indeed, their reports to the throne were fictional precisely because of the need to conform to expectations of the universal emperor.

Recent Western scholarship has important implications for the translation of key terms here, though the most debated among them is not *Tianchao* but a word that was a part of the same set of terms for ordering the world: *yi* – which is what Chinese sources call the British, although it referred to many other peoples besides. This word was translated as "foreigner" by missionary Robert Morrison in his 1815 *Dictionary of the Chinese Language*, but by the mid-nineteenth century the British came to equate it with "barbarian," a translation also used by John Fairbank. The chief recent critic of this translation is Lydia Liu, who points out that both "barbarian" and "*yi*" have long and complex histories, and, having been used in different ways throughout those histories, it is far from evident that they can be harnessed together. As Liu comments, the

³ Joanna Waley-Cohen, "China and Western Technology in the Late Eighteenth Century," *The American Historical Review*, 98, no. 5 (1993): 1527.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 1527.

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equation of the terms “barbarian” and “*yi*” falsely suggests that there is “hard linguistic evidence for the theory of Chinese xenophobia that has prevailed for so long in modern historiography.”⁵

Liu cites the Qing military officer Wu Qitai, who attempted to explain to the British that “*yi*” only meant people from the outside, with no pejorative connotations.⁶ Much of the argument, both between the nineteenth-century British and the Qing officials, and among twentieth-century scholars, has concentrated on the latter claim: was *yi* derogatory or not? But part of the reason for it arising as a point of dispute was also the uncertainty as to whether the Qing government saw the British as the subjects of a “foreign” state or as distant self-ruling subjects of the universal Heavenly Dynasty. Part of what the British wanted was recognition that they were foreigners, in the European sense of the term. After all, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British seemed to enjoy what Beth Tobin calls “cultural cross-dressing” as peoples they considered barbarians, just as some Europeans in China also “enjoyed being the foreign devil.”⁷ As the East India Company secretary in China, Hugh Hamilton Lindsay, insisted, “The English nation are not barbarians, but *foreigners*” (emphasis added).⁸

Did *yi* mean “foreigner” in the European sense? The British pointed out in response to Wu Qitai that *yi* also referred to many of the indigenous peoples in the south and southwest of the Qing Empire. One possibility is that *yi* meant different things in different contexts. Context was crucial, but there was a broader logic at work here, one that applied in discussions of both the *yi* in the southwest and the British *yi* of the coast. In all cases the *yi* came from southern lands beyond the domain that Qing officials called the *nei di* – “the Inner Lands” (hence Wu’s comment that *yi* referred to peoples from the “outside”). The *nei di* was an area roughly (though ambiguously) defined by the territory governed by the bureaucratic system of administration known as *junxian* in Chinese – an area roughly the same as that settled by the Han. Of course, the Han moved beyond the boundaries of *junxian* administration, but they were often viewed with suspicion when they did so. In the southwest, the homelands of the *yi* beyond the *nei di* were called *yi di* – *yi* lands – or more evocatively, *yi chao* – “*yi* nests.” The fact that *junxian* territory was called the “Inner Lands”

⁵ Lydia H. Liu, *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 39.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 43.

⁷ Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth Century British Painting* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), chapter 3. The second quote is from Liu, *The Clash of Empires*, p.106. Liu notes that only a “few Englishmen” who enjoyed playing the “foreign devil” – though the number of times the term has been employed in publications about China suggests more than a few British people were intrigued by the idea.

⁸ Quoted in Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832–1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 41.

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did not mean that the “*yi* lands” were seen as “foreign” in the sense of the term in European discourse. Even though they were not subject to rule by Han or Manchu bureaucrats, the *yi* of the southwest were still seen as subjects of the emperor. It was this – as well as the possible pejorative connotations of *yi* – that bothered the British.

Our translation of Mao's work uses the Romanization of the Chinese character, “*yi*.” There is a danger in proposing that “*yi*,” or any other word, is “untranslatable.” A naïve but common view of language is that the lack of a single, neat translation into a given language signals a fundamental incomprehensibility of a concept to speakers of that language. It is not our view that the Chinese-language term “*yi*” cannot be properly understood by English-speakers, or that the notion would have been particularly alien to the nineteenth-century British. In some ways, *yi* is comparable to “Indian” in nineteenth-century English: an old term for people from one part of the world, applied broadly to peoples of another (the Americas and the Pacific). In its New World usage it indicated cultural foreignness; savagery and crudeness, none of which precluded states' claims to political sovereignty over those thus named, just like the Chinese term “*yi*.”

Imperial expectations resulted in a delicacy in language that poses further translation problems (which are, by extension, problems that relate to the interpretation of history). Chapter 3 of this book discusses the two contrasting strategies for dealing with the British pursued by the Daoguang emperor: *jiao* (here translated as “suppression” and “crush” depending on context and tone), and *fu* (here translated as “conciliation,” but also translated as “soothing” by some scholars). The latter is particularly difficult, since the character also occurs in *xunfu* – the Qing office usually translated as “governor,” – and *fuyuan da jiangjun* (or in Manchu *goroki be dahabure amba jiyanggiyūn*), which Gertraude Roth Li translates as “general-in-chief who pacifies distant lands.”⁹ “General-in-chief who conciliates/soothes distant lands” would have rather different implications for how the Qing saw the role of their top military leaders, so which is it? In my view, the discrepancy demonstrates a shift in the meaning of *fu*, from “control” to “conciliate.” But it conveyed the latter meaning euphemistically, chosen to lend shades of authority and statecraft to a politically unpopular position that many regarded as surrender. “*Jimi*” served as another, similar, Qing euphemism. In political lexicon, *jimi* appears to have originated in the Tang era (AD 618–907), when it referred to small autonomous polities in the south that had come within (or were brought under) the wider orbit of the Tang imperium. In this context, historians translate it as “haltered and bridled” after the literal meaning of the characters; and for the

⁹ Gertraude Roth Li, *Manchu: A Textbook for Reading Documents* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 402.

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Tang state the term suggested a degree of control where there had previously been none. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, Chinese officials used the term to indicate almost the opposite: a degree of looseness that stood in contrast to greater integration, rather than absence of control. Thus, in this context it is typically translated as “loose rein.” Like *fu*, *jimi* was a carefully chosen euphemism, the original meaning of which was subtly distorted. The euphemisms of a discourse reveal its sensitivities and taboos: *jiao* and *fu* were not policy options debated in neutral, detached terms, or weighed up only through rational analysis of costs and benefits. As with discussions that took place in the empire the Qing confronted in the Opium War, Qing discourse was conducted with terms with emotional heft and sensitivity, which no proper analysis of it can ignore.

This translation has been a collaborative effort. Chapter 6 is translated by Peter Lavelle; Chapter 7 by Craig Smith; and the rest of the chapters by Joseph Lawson. All the translators have relied on the help of Zhou Jian (East China Normal University), whose clarifications and explanations have made this translation possible, although he is certainly not to be blamed for any errors. Li Wenjie (East China Normal University) has also dedicated much time to this project in the revision and editing stages.

J.L.

Introduction to the English Edition

Julia Lovell

Birkbeck, University of London

The 1990s were studded with patriotic commemorations of the first Opium War (1840–42) in mainland China. In 1990, to mark the 150th anniversary of the outbreak of hostilities, a plethora of articles, conferences and volumes depicted the conflict as the traumatic inauguration of China's modern history: as the beginning of foreign imperialist schemes to destroy China with drugs and violence. In 1997, a historical blockbuster, *The Opium War*, hit Chinese cinemas. Its release was precisely timed to coincide with the long-anticipated return to mainland Chinese administration of Hong Kong – the British occupation of which in 1842 was, pronounced China's leader Jiang Zemin, “the epitome of the humiliation China suffered in modern history.” Directed by Xie Jin, a veteran filmmaker whose career spanned the Maoist and post-Mao eras, *The Opium War* was at the time the most expensive film made in mainland China.

New tourist destinations monumentalizing the war sprang up across south and east China. A vast Sea Battle Museum was built along the Guangdong coastline, recounting British gunboats' 1841 destruction of the crucial forts that guarded the riverway up to Guangzhou. The temple on the outskirts of Nanjing, in which the treaty that concluded the conflict was signed on 29 August 1842, was reconstructed into the Museum of the Nanjing Treaty. In 1997, again to mark the Handover of Hong Kong, six million *yuan* in public subscriptions were collected to pay for the forging of a massive “Bell of Warning,” which was installed at the entrance of the temple's grounds: “to peal long and loud, lest we forget the national humiliation of the past.”

These commemorative events were manifestations of one of the post-Mao Chinese state's most important political campaigns: Patriotic Education, a crusade designed to “boost the nation's spirit” by drawing attention both to China's terrible “century of humiliation” inflicted by foreign imperialism – beginning with the Opium War and ending with the Second World War – and to China's heroic triumph over such adversity after 1949. Through the 1990s and beyond, the Opium War has served as the foundational episode of this patriotic education: as the tragic curtain-raiser on modern China, but also as the first great call-to-arms against a bullying West and the trigger for China's

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national rejuvenation. The war thus marks the start of China's struggle to free itself from what Mao Zedong termed "semi-colonial semi-feudalism," and to "stand up" as a strong modern nation.

In 1995, however, the same year in which Xie Jin began filming his blockbuster, a daringly alternative historical assessment of the Opium War was published: Mao Haijian's *The Collapse of a Dynasty*. It is a rich, complex work of history: painstakingly detailed in its archival research, and impressively nuanced in its judgment of the Opium War. Setting itself against decades-old Chinese political orthodoxy on the conflict, the book analyzed the war and its consequences with dispassionate realism, rather than emotional patriotism. While tough on British behavior during the war, the book was also trenchant in its criticisms of the ruling Qing dynasty's response, and of subsequent Chinese myth-making. In the cultural context of 1990s China, the publication of *The Collapse of a Dynasty* – a serious, audaciously heterodox account of one of the key crises of modern Chinese history – was an extraordinary intellectual event.

On a technical level alone, *The Collapse of a Dynasty* – which moves between reconstruction of court ceremony, legal analysis, military micro-history and the traces of "history from below" excavated from the archive – is a magisterial work of narrative history. A survey of the main text and notes showcases Mao Haijian's fluency in a wealth of multilingual sources on the first Opium War. His research encompasses Chinese, Japanese and English-language materials; diplomatic reports; eye-witness accounts; imperial edicts; memorials to the throne and the emperor's scribbled responses in vermilion ink; soldiers' accounts; and anonymous placards, banners and songs. This command of the international archive enables him to weigh up wildly contrasting accounts of the same events (and to highlight, along the way, some outlandish deceptions practiced by Chinese officials on their emperor). His book allows us insight into the minds of both Chinese and British participants in the Opium War, and also into the very texture of the archive itself. Mao explains, for example, that in China's First Historical Archive, tucked inside the Forbidden City, the emperor's edicts on the Opium War are catalogued into a special "archive of suppression and arrests" (*jiao bu dang*). With this observation, Mao Haijian deftly communicates the Qing failure accurately to size up the British as military and political adversaries. Throughout the conflict, the Qing dynasty viewed the British not as a genuinely new threat to its imperial system, but as temporary insurgents against the Qing universal empire – as domestic rebels to be "arrested and suppressed." This war, in the eyes of China's rulers, was an aggravation comparable to other domestic and frontier revolts the government was struggling to defeat at around the same time.

But *The Collapse of a Dynasty* is far more than an intricate tapestry of primary sources. It also offers a major historiographical contribution to ongoing

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debates, in Chinese and in English, about late Qing Chinese history. Although some of Mao Haijian's judgments may appear contrarian within the context of recent Chinese historiography on the Opium War, he is never gratuitously partial or revisionist. The book is, instead, even-handedly critical of both sides in the conflict: of British immorality and ruthlessness in imposing upon the Qing a system of international rules that the latter did not understand; and of the malfunctioning Qing polity, led by an unimaginative, unrealistic emperor, and staffed by irresponsible, fraudulent and incompetent functionaries.

Mao's account takes aim first at traditional Anglophone historiographies of the war. The principal cause of the war was, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests, Britain's determination to maintain its illegal, profitable opium trade between British India and China, in the face of the Qing government's resolution to ban drug smuggling. But both before and after the decision to go to war with China was debated and taken in 1839–40, British politicians, traders, soldiers, diplomats – and later historians – were discomforted by press accusations that Christian Britain was fighting an “Opium War,” and instead strove to take the moral high ground in the conflict. Through the nineteenth century and beyond, influential British voices argued that Chinese arrogance, and not British greed and law-breaking, had provoked the war. The Qing government's unreasonably arrogant and xenophobic (as many Britons caricatured it) desire to control the Chinese Empire's trade arrangements *compelled* the British to open China forcibly to the ways of the modern international world. According to this view, the Opium War was caused by a collision of cultures: progressive British free trade versus the irrational isolationism of China's Qing dynasty. “A large family of the human race,” exulted the *Illustrated London News* after the Qing defeat in 1842,

which for centuries has been isolated from the rest, is now about to enter with them into mutual intercourse. Vast hordes of populations, breaking through the ignorance and superstition which has for ages enveloped them, will now come out into the open day, and enjoy the freedom of a more expanded civilization, and enter upon prospects immeasurably grander.

Mao's account of the British response to the anti-opium campaign in south China that led to all-out war in 1840 puts the lie to this self-justifying rhetoric, and squarely blames British greed and aggression for the outbreak of hostilities. By the end of 1839, Charles Elliot – the British government's representative in China – had supplied the Qing government with numerous grounds for tough reprisals. He had repeatedly flouted Qing law by refusing to oblige British opium smugglers in Guangzhou to sign a pledge to discontinue the opium trade, and by refusing to hand over British sailors involved in a fracas that had ended with the death of a Chinese villager. Elliot had also used force to

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prevent two British ships from complying with Qing regulations, and authorized a military clash with Chinese ships. Neither does Mao set much credence by the British ideal of free trade: in the pages of his book, brute force (“gunboat diplomacy”) underpins the trade system that Britain sought to establish with China after victory in 1842. In the negotiations that followed the Qing surrender, the British plenipotentiary Henry Pottinger deployed his military superiority and colonial wile to push for agreements on tariffs and additional treaties that blatantly infringed Qing sovereignty.

Mao’s disapproval of the behavior of the British is clear. Yet he has little sympathy for the Chinese conduct of the war either. Since the war ended, and especially after the emergence of mass nationalist parties (the Guomindang and the Communist parties) in the 1920s and 1930s, a powerful mythology about Qing China’s waging of the Opium War has evolved. Certain officials (such as Lin Zexu) have been lionized as clear-sighted patriots; others (such as Qishan) as traitors machinating to undermine the former. If only the former had been allowed to prevail, this view of history goes, the war’s humiliating defeats could have been avoided and the British could have been chased out of China. Mao is impatient with such wishful thinking, criticizing the dearth of realism and military *nous* demonstrated by “heroes” such as Lin Zexu; and finding some virtue in the approach of “villains” such as Qishan or Yilibu, who advocated negotiation.

In disparaging the Qing war effort, Mao finds fault both with individuals and with the system in which they operated. He attacks the Qing conceit of China as an empire encompassing “all under heaven” (*tianxia*). The emperor’s assumption that he wielded universal authority, Mao argues, prevented the acknowledgment of alternative political worldviews, and created a domestic climate of fear that promoted yes-men who dissembled about political and military failures in order to protect themselves. Opium War-era China, as described by Mao, was a badly dysfunctional polity: a fractious, failing empire, scattered with discontents and chancers ready to sell their services to the highest bidder, regardless of his or her ethnicity. Many ordinary Chinese people pragmatically saw the war as an opportunity to make money from the British, rather than as a clash with a conspicuously alien enemy. They sold the British supplies, they navigated, and they spied for them. And while supposedly fighting the British, Qing China was also at war with itself. During the siege of one key city, Chinese forces based there were too busy plundering, killing and (in extreme cases) eating each other to put up a concerted fight. While civilians and soldiers were being killed, and towns destroyed, the Qing officials who were supposedly running the war effort hid or lost copies of the British war demands; they told their emperor bare-faced lies about outstanding victories that were in fact appalling defeats; and one general was catatonic on opium when he should have been directing battles. Two-and-a-half years into a war that had cost his administration tens of millions of ounces of silver, and

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thousands of lives, the emperor wrote a dazzlingly vague letter to one of his frontline officials: where in fact, he wanted to know, was England?

In constructing this portrait of Qing incompetence, Mao sets himself somewhat at odds not only with Chinese historiography, but also with a body of recent scholarship within Western academe known as the “new Qing history.”

Since the 1990s, scholars such as Pamela Kyle Crossley, Mark Elliot, James Hevia, Peter Perdue and Evelyn Rawski have taken issue with earlier scholarly orthodoxy on the Qing – which portrayed the dynasty as decadent, complacent and sinicized. The “new Qing history” instead characterizes the empire as a vast, multi-ethnic jigsaw of lands and peoples, led by vigorous, pragmatic conquerors who freely made use of European military science to double the size of their empire across the eighteenth century. Mao’s first chapter, on the severe degeneration of the Qing military, appears to contradict flatly the more positive appraisals advanced by “new Qing historians.” But these two interpretations are not necessarily contradictory. The “new Qing history” focuses on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while Mao’s preoccupation is with the nineteenth century, a period of clear decline for the Qing Empire. By the end of the eighteenth century – a century of spectacular political and military achievements for the Qing – the empire was approaching its limits, as demographic explosion led to fierce competition for work and resources, ecological degradation, price rises, bureaucratic chaos and corruption. And as the empire began to malfunction, so the population began to complain, with growing militancy. Thanks to the overextension and underfunding of Qing armies, domestic rebellions proved increasingly difficult to suppress. In the first half of the nineteenth century, therefore, the Qing Empire was for the most part too busy maintaining its multiple frontiers and vast interior to counter a new British threat along its southern coast.

Although Mao often seems radical in his analysis, the philosophical rationale behind his book is more traditional. Over the millennia, history in China has rarely been seen as an abstract, academic pursuit; instead, both the rulers and the ruled have regarded study of the past as a mirror to illuminate and guide the here-and-now. Mao’s approach to Opium War history always keeps its significance for the present day in clear view. In *The Collapse of a Dynasty*, Mao regularly evokes the relevance of the Opium War for contemporary China’s painful, ongoing process of modernization.

It is commonly said that the nineteenth was the British century, while the twentieth century belonged to the Americans. What about the twenty-first? Some Chinese people declare that the twenty-first century will belong to China. But the really critical question remains: with what sort of attitude should the Chinese people enter this century? How can the Chinese people make it “the Chinese people’s century”? ... [And] in my view the most important question left to us by the Opium War is this: has the gap between China and the West shrunk over the last 150 years, or grown?

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Concerned to dispel China's nationalistic mythologies of the Opium War through rigorous investigation of the archive, Mao's assessment is critically patriotic: he questions the morality and equality of the international system enforced by British imperialism, but he also accepts it pragmatically as a *fait accompli* that the Chinese, both 170 years ago and still today, need to understand and participate in if they are to safeguard the prosperity and well-being of billions of Chinese people. "[H]istorians' sense of attachment to their country should never lead them to create alibis for it," Mao writes. "In light of this conviction, it is my intention to favor neither those who supported compromise, nor those who wanted to fight. A nation's self-criticisms are vital safeguards against making the same mistakes again."

In writing thus, Mao faintly echoes a self-critical Chinese school of analysis on the Opium War that predated the "China-as-victim" paradigm popularized by the Nationalist and Communist parties after the 1920s. In the late Qing period, thinkers such as Yan Fu and Liang Qichao (both passionate, self-avowed patriots) refused to view their country as the entirely blameless victim of Western imperialism. They also lambasted the corruption, ignorance and conservatism that, in their view, had allowed the West to take advantage of China through the nineteenth century and beyond. Xia Xie, a well-regarded 1860s chronicler of China's first and second (1856–60) Opium Wars with Britain, agreed that the Qing's troubles were self-inflicted:

Worms only appear in a rotten carcass. It was not until exaction followed exaction, and justice was denied to creditors, that the foreigners turned upon us ... opium only came because profits being impossible by fair means, the foreigners were driven to obtain them by foul means.

It is to Mao's credit that he can weigh up such contrasting and politically inflected historiographical traditions on the first Opium War to create his own rigorously archival, vigorously argued synthesis.

In the two decades that have passed since the first publication of Mao Haijian's book, some of the political pressures on the public history of the Opium War present in 1990s China have faded – at least within academia. While Mao himself has moved on to writing a multi-volume history of the "Hundred Days' Reforms" of 1898, his fellow scholars now engage appreciatively with his carefully researched insights into the first Opium War. The publication of Mao's book in an English translation that faithfully preserves the textures of the original is an important moment for Anglophone publishing on China. Joseph Lawson's new version gives Anglophone readers, for the first time, access to the complexity of contemporary Sinophone historical writing on one of the most controversial events in modern Chinese history.