CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE OLD ORDER

HISTORY AND CHINA'S REVOLUTION

The history of modern China – what is now thought to have happened there – is full of controversy. Major events are known but their significance is disputed. Meanwhile many minor events remain unknown or disregarded.

The first cause of controversy is widespread historical ignorance due to the lack of a generally accepted body of research and writing in this underdeveloped field. I say 'historical ignorance' because the task of history is to understand the circumstances, motives and actions of *all* parties concerned, and an unbalanced knowledge, of one side only, may leave us still quite ignorant of the other side in a conflict, and therefore less able to comprehend it.

For example, British documents on the Opium War of 1840–2 were published extensively at the time, but Chinese documents not until ninety years later, in 1932. Moreover, the documents of both sides give primarily official points of view; the wartime experience of ordinary Chinese people was less well recorded and has been less studied. Even this seemingly well known event is still imperfectly understood. For instance, how far were Chinese local people merely passive spectators of Anglo-Ch'ing hostilities? How far were they moved to patriotic resistance? Opinions and instances differ.

A second cause of controversy is the broad cultural gap that separated the major historical protagonists – not only the cultural differences in language, thought, and values between the foreign invaders of China and the resistant Chinese ruling class in the nineteenth century, but also the similar differences between that ruling class and the great mass of the Chinese people, once they became revolutionary in the twentieth century. In short, China's modern history records two great dramas – first, the cultural confrontation between the expanding Western civilization of international trade and warfare, and the persistent Chinese civilization of agriculture and bureaucracy; and second, arising out of the first,

the fundamental transformation of China in the greatest of all revolutions.

These vast movements of conflict and change – between China and the outside world, between China old and new – have produced distinct points of view in the historical record and among historians. Most obvious to Western historians is the Victorian view of the world with which the British, French and American expansionists set up the unequal treaty system in the mid-nineteenth century. They believed in the nation state, the rule of law, the benefits of individual rights, Christianity and scientific technology, and the use of warfare in the service of progress.

Similarly identifiable is the old Chinese ruling-class view of the world which believed in the classical Confucian teachings and the universal supremacy of the Son of Heaven, who maintained his rule by the edifying example of his virtuous conduct at the top of a harmonious social order of hierarchy and status. In this *ancien régime* the classical learning tolerated only change-within-tradition, the extended family system dominated the individual, a doctrine of duty eclipsed any doctrine of rights, civil administrators controlled the military and used the merchants, and the principles of moral conduct took precedence over human passions, material profit, and the letter of the law. Truly, two civilizations stood embattled.

As the more ancient and less rapidly changing civilization gradually gave way before the more modern and dynamic, a pioneer generation of Chinese scholars and administrators pursued goals of reform, gradually working out a new view of the world and of China's place in it. This new view, in an era of collapse, inevitably lacked the unity of its predecessor. Confusion of ideas grew as central authority declined, and only in the mid-twentieth century could a new historical orthodoxy become established through the application of Marxism-Leninism to China in the thought of Mao Tse-tung.

As the great Chinese revolution continues to unfold, the Maoist view of history will continue to evolve; so also will Western, Japanese and other outsiders' views, and a degree of convergence between them is to be expected. Nevertheless, present-day ideas of what has happened in modern China, how and why, will continue to be highly controversial. The contrast between Chinese and foreign, Confucian and Victorian, views of history in the nineteenth century has been succeeded by a conflict of various views today. The fact that these latter views share much more common ground as to the nature of modern history may only sharpen the controversies that arise between them. But the continuing struggle of ideas in the effort to understand the past origins of the present can only strengthen, in the end, the common bonds of understanding among peoples.

Although the foci of historical concern shift about from generation to generation, in the case of modern China certain unresolved problems of interpretation seem likely to pre-empt attention for some time to come. One major problem of interpretation is the degree and nature of foreign influence. Foreign activity in China increased markedly during the nineteenth century, becoming steadily more influential and pervasive and eventually contributing to a metamorphosis of Chinese life from top to bottom. Yet the process of foreign impact and Chinese response began gradually, almost imperceptibly. The perception of this process has developed through a succession of phases with increasing intensity and sophistication.

In the first phase it was recognized by observers both foreign and Chinese that the old agrarian-bureaucratic empire of China was no match for the expanding British and other empires of international trade and gunboats. The tempo of foreign aggression on China steadily accelerated. The Opium War of 1840–2 was followed within fifteen years by the Anglo-French invasion of 1857–60, within another decade or so by Russia's occupation of Ili in 1871 and Japan's take-over of Liu-ch'iu in 1874, and within still another decade by the Sino-French war of 1883–5. Nine years later came the smashing Japanese victory over China in 1894–5, followed by the Scramble for Concessions of 1898 and the Boxer War of 1900. These dramatic disasters were accompanied by a less tangible but more far-reaching collapse of China's traditional self-image, her Sino-centric view of the world.

In retrospect, China's nineteenth-century experience therefore became a stark tragedy, an unforeseen and certainly enormous decline and fall almost without equal in history. This tragedy was the more bitter because it was so gradual, inexorable, and complete. The old order fought a rear-guard action, giving ground slowly but always against greater odds, each disaster followed by a greater, until one by one China's asserted superiority over foreigners, the central power of the emperor at Peking, the reigning Confucian orthodoxy, and the ruling elite of scholar-officials were each in turn undermined and destroyed.

A second perception gained ground among Chinese revolutionaries of the early twentieth century, who found themselves in a different world, as nationalists in an expanded international world of nationalisms. Under imperialist pressure the *ancien régime* of the Ch'ing dynasty in China had taken on during the late nineteenth century an increasing burden of foreign special privilege. This had been indexed in the steady expansion of the unequal treaty system: the increase in the number of treaty ports from five in 1842 to about fifty in 1911; the extension of extraterritorial

consular jurisdiction over treaty-power nationals, their property, trade and industry; the expansion of foreign shipping in Chinese waters from gunboats on the coast to steamship lines on main rivers; the employment of foreign administrators not only in the maritime customs but also in some native customs, post office and salt revenue administrations; the spread of missionary work into every province and into the fields of education and medicine; and a multitude of other features like foreign garrisons in Peking after 1900 and pre-emption of customs revenues after 1911 to pay off foreign loans and indemnities. All this represented the special influence in Chinese life of people from outside the country. For modern nationalists, what could be more provocative of patriot indignation? More and more, from the period of World War I, this foreign invasion was called 'imperialism', and imperialism was seen as a humiliation that must be wiped out.

Another perception accompanied this view: that imperialism in China had been facilitated by Chinese weakness, not merely in military terms but in moral terms – in a lack of patriotic devotion, manifested in working for foreigners and profiting with them from the vicious traffic in opium or in coolies as well as from the evils of industrial exploitation of labour in port cities. Moral degeneracy was equally evident in warlord particularism, landlord selfishness, family-first nepotism. Most of all China's weakness had inhered in the old ruling-class strata – the alien Manchu court, the out-of-date officials trained in ancient classics, the literati whose prerogatives let them monopolize higher learning and culture, the landlords who exploited impoverished tenants. All this complex of institutions and practices could be summed up under 'feudalism'.

In this way China's nineteenth-century disaster was perceived in the twentieth century under twin headings of feudalism and imperialism. These terms and the explication of them by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao have been used in the People's Republic to describe China's modern history. In a vast land still overwhelmingly agrarian, still mindful of the Japanese aggression of the 1930s and 1940s, the native ruling class and foreign invasion stand out as the two major evils inherited from the past and still to be combated today.

The concept of imperialism has been expanded during its use in China. The role of imperialism as seen in retrospect has grown steadily since the 1920s in the thinking of both the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. It is built into the thought of Mao Tse-tung. Imperialism was at work from the Opium War onward, long before the rise of the Leninist type of finance-capitalist imperialism in the 1890s. Maoist imperialism not only goes further back in time to include the wars and gunboat diplomacy

of the era of commercial expansion in the early Victorian age; it also expands the scope of imperialism to include nearly all forms of foreign contact in the nineteenth century, including Christian missions as cultural imperialism. Since the often-aggressive expansion of Western activities is plain in the record, historians generally feel justified in the broad conclusion that the Chinese people were invaded, exploited and victimized by imperialism. This can hardly be disputed as a generalization. The aggressive expansion of Europe and its latter-day offshoots is a major fact of modern world history.

The studies in this volume, however, are committed to being past-minded as well as present-minded, and therefore to reconstructing the views, motives and historical understanding of people at the time when events occurred. Since China's historical consciousness has changed in the process of revolution, it is imperative to understand the Chinese self-image under the old order as well as the conditions of life then. Such an investigation, once undertaken, begins to fill out the picture of imperialism. From a unilateral force which overwhelms China from the outside, it becomes a result of interaction, and as this interaction between China and the outside world is studied further, imperialism as a generality breaks down into a variety of factors and circumstances.

It appears first that Chinese society was enormous in mass and extremely various in its local conditions. Because of its size, it was less easily influenced from abroad, and the reactions to foreign contact were diverse and separated rather than uniform and concentrated. In general, China was remarkably self-sufficient: first of all in foreign trade, which remained a comparatively unimportant part of the economy. In the second place, the Ch'ing empire, by its conquest of Ili in the 1750s and its successful dealings with the Russians at Kiakhta and the British at Canton, had established a seemingly strong defensive position militarily. Finally, the ideology of imperial Confucianism under the Ch'ing was almost impervious to the acceptance of foreign political concepts. All these factors made for a remarkable self-sufficiency. But still another historical tradition also made China unresponsive to foreign aggression – this was the tradition of barbarian invasion and the absorption or neutralization of the barbarians in the vastness of China's society and culture. For this reason, imperial Confucianism had become a supranationalistic system which could not easily appreciate the sentiments of nationalists from outside countries.

In this way the picture emerges of a Chinese state and society which, in the early 1800s, was self-sufficiently absorbed in its own domestic life and not capable of quick reaction to a Western invasion. The subsequent

Chinese interaction with the invaders did not meet the foreign system on its own terms. The Ch'ing dynasty, for example, was not primarily concerned with foreign trade and investment as functions important to the state. The Ch'ing regime was mainly concerned with preserving the agrarian social order over which it presided, and from which it derived its main sustenance. Foreign relations were a marginal concern. It was at first assumed that Westerners could, in fact, be taken marginally into the Chinese polity and social order and be permitted to function on its periphery, as other foreigners had done in the past.

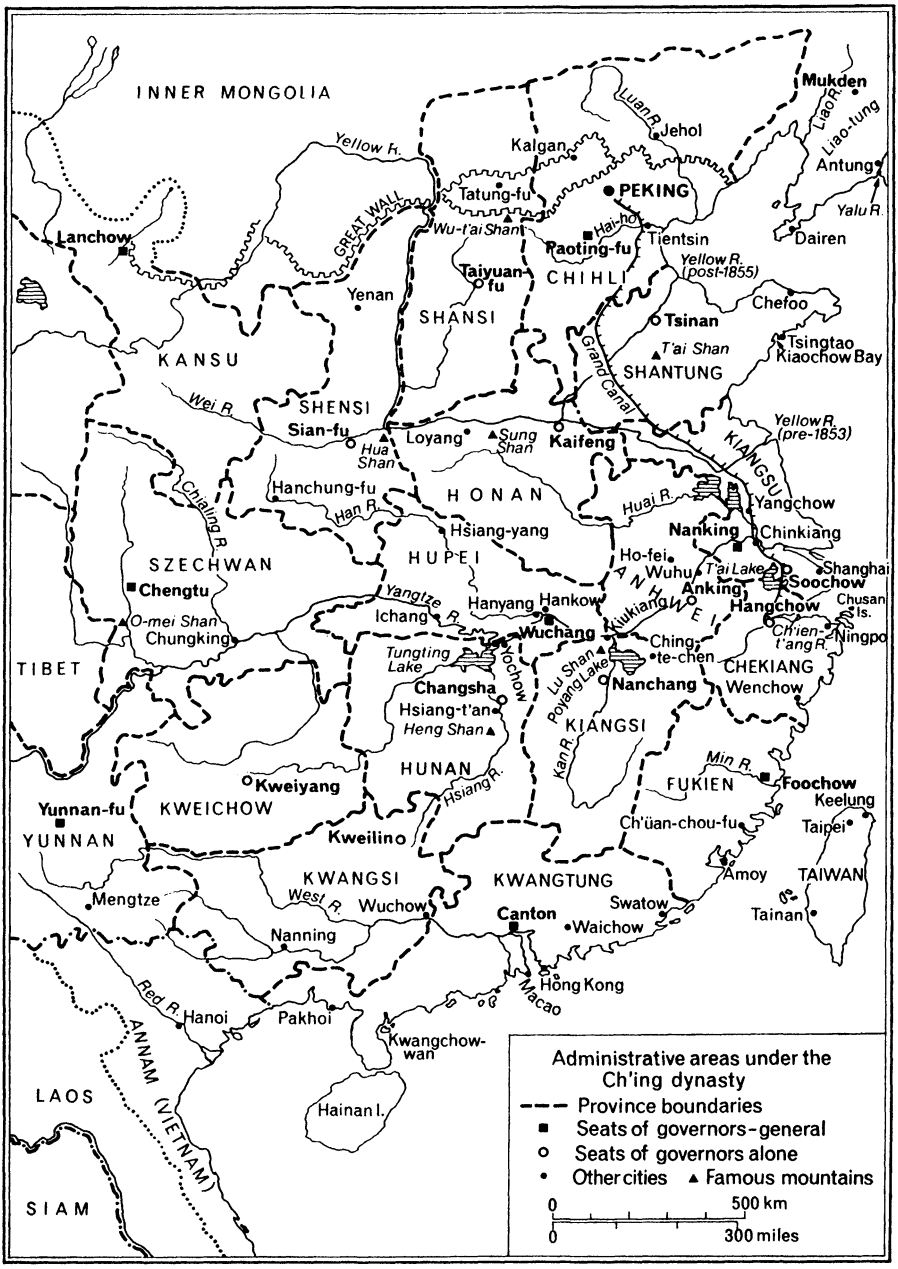
As a result of these conditions of size, self-sufficiency, unresponsiveness and lack of concern among the ruling class, the Ch'ing empire was ill-prepared for Western contact. Put in more positive terms, when this contact materialized in modern times, one clue to China's collapse lay in the very success which China's civilization had achieved in pre-modern times. To understand the collapse one must appreciate the earlier success, for it had been so great that China's leaders were unprepared for disaster. As the reformer Liang Ch'i-ch'ao put it as late as 1896, 'Here is a big mansion which has lasted a thousand years. . . . It is still a magnificently big thing, but when wind and rain suddenly come up, its fall is foredoomed. Yet the people in the house are still happily playing or soundly sleeping . . . quite indifferent.'[1]

THE OLD SOCIETY

Another set of unresolved problems of interpretation concerns the traditional society – its social structure, the administrative institutions and ideology of its government and its economic growth. One widely held assumption is that this traditional society had created such an effective and balanced structure of ideas and practices that an innovative response to Western contact was difficult. In this view China's 'maturity' was evidenced in her stability, her capacity to maintain a steady state almost like the homeostasis of physiology. To put it another way, the accumulation of vested interests was so great as to inhibit change. The result was a tremendous inertia or persistence in established ways, a tendency to change only within tradition. This notion of China's inertial momentum and non-responsiveness is supported also by the concept of the autonomy of culture – that Chinese ways were different, mutually reinforcing, and therefore resistant to outside stimuli.

Broad conceptions of this sort may of course merely substitute for

[1] Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, *Yin-ping-shih ho-chi*, 1.2, trans. in Ssu-yü Teng and John K. Fairbank, *China's response to the West*, 155.



MAP 2. China proper in the nineteenth century

thought. No doubt they display the degree of our present ignorance. Yet if history is to give understanding to non-historians, it must use general ideas. The essential prerequisite for generalizing is a factual picture of the Chinese state and society, including its general conditions and institutional practices, about 1800. At this time China's population was over 300 million, almost double that of Europe including Russia, and it is safe to say that her home market and domestic trade were also far greater than those of Europe.

The inertial momentum of China's social order was evident in the early nineteenth century at every level – among the common people in the peasant villages and market towns, among the dominant big families of the local elite or 'gentry', in the layers of imperial administration rising from the local magistracies all the way up to the court at Peking, and in the monarchy at the top of the human scene. This Chinese world (*t'ien-hsia*, 'all under heaven') was considered to be, and to a large extent was, remarkably unified, homogeneous and long-lasting.

The unity of the empire had been the first great achievement of Chinese civilization and it remained a major concern, for unity meant peace. And yet the mere size and diversity of the empire often made for disunity. The eighteen provinces were divided by nature into a number of discrete and clearly marked regions, each comparatively self-sufficient. The central Taiyuan plain and Fen river valley of Shansi province, for example, were bounded on two sides by mountains and on two sides by the Yellow River. The great irrigated basin of Szechwan was ringed by mountains and communicated with the rest of China mainly through the Yangtze gorges. Yunnan province in the south-west was a plateau not in easy touch with the rest of the country. The great rice baskets of the Canton delta, the Yangtze delta, and Hunan and Hupei provinces each provided a base for local power. South Manchuria, as foreigners have called it in the twentieth century, or in Chinese terms of 1800 Liao-tung, was another power base where the Ch'ing dynasty of the Manchus had built up its strength before taking over south of the Wall in 1644.

Moreover, China stretched so far from north to south that the climatic difference created contrasting ways of life in the two regions. In the south and south-east, the heavy monsoon rainfall in summer facilitated double-cropping of rice. In contrast, the sparseness and unpredictability of rainfall on the north-western Great Wall frontier left people there constantly in danger of famine. The dry farmers in the north could live in houses of tamped earth walls or simple sun-baked brick with thatched roofs, while the wet farmers of the south had to use kiln-baked brick and tile roofs. They also wore straw sandals or clogs instead of cloth shoes, and broad plaited hats against rain and sun rather than the fur-covered caps of the

north with ear flaps against winter cold. Much transport in the south was on waterways or, alternatively, on stone-paved paths not adequate for wheeled vehicles. Carrying poles, barrows and donkeys were universal, but the typical north China transport was by two-wheeled cart along dusty roads, frequently sunk several feet down into the loess soil scoured out by the wind. Most striking was the scenic contrast between the broad north China plain, dotted by walled villages that could defend themselves against cavalry raiders, and the typical hill country of south China where cavalry were useless and farmsteads might be more widely scattered in smaller units amid a lush cover of trees and vegetation. Since irrigated rice culture was far more productive than dry cereal farming, south China had a higher per capita food supply and more landlordism and tenancy among farmers.[2]

The gradual spread of Chinese civilization, with its characteristic features of intensive agriculture, tightly-organized family life, and bureaucratic administration, had given an underlying homogeneity to the whole country north and south, east and west. Perhaps this homogeneity was greater in the minds of the ruling elite than a sociologist would have found it to be in fact. Nevertheless, it was generally assumed. Like political unity, cultural homogeneity was one of China's great social myths, demonstrating the universality of the Confucian way of life. Consequently, regional differences and the forms of localism have not yet been much studied, for it had always been and still is the fashion to discuss the vast land of China as a unit.

The sense of unity and homogeneity had been fostered by the extraordinary continuity of the Chinese way of life, which came down undisrupted from neolithic times before the dawn of history. Hoe agriculture by family groups in settled villages had emerged by the fifth millennium BC in the Wei valley near the great bend of the Yellow River (as at the site of Pan-p'o outside Sian). Despite occasional invasions of warrior-rulers, Chinese village life had evolved steadily from that time with a continuity seemingly unbroken by sudden changes, either social or technological. The maintenance of peace and order among the village communities had been the special concern of China's equally ancient ruling class. Under successive dynasties it had gradually created complex institutions of bureaucratic government. Until after 1800 the agrarian-bureaucratic empire of China thus preserved a social order more ancient than, and very different from, the commercial-military society of Europe.

[2] Of the notable series of Western geographers who described the terrain and ecology of China in the century before 1949, one of the most widely travelled was George B. Cressey, whose two general descriptions still have visual introductory value: *China's geographic foundations* (1934), *Land of the 500 million* (1955).

The individual's prowess and aggressiveness, including his use of violence, had not been fostered in China's agrarian communities as much as in the seafaring, warfare, exploration and overseas emigration of the Europeans.

By 1800 we may assume that the ordinary peasants, who formed at least four-fifths of the population, were cultured individuals in the sense that they were well-schooled in the bonds of kinship, the duties of status, and the forms of politeness and social deportment, but generally illiterate or only semi-literate. Consequently their lives were less devoted to Confucian rationalism than to the lore, superstitions and Taoist-Buddhist religious observances of the folk culture. As farmers, most of them lived close to nature. They were accustomed to nature's beauties but also suffered from epidemic diseases, for example, the prevalence of eye and skin ailments and intestinal parasites. As commoners, they were well aware of the ruling elite and its prerogatives, but they saw little of it directly and were chiefly absorbed in their own village-and-market-centre community.

The usual village, perhaps one hundred households, was below the market level and not self-sufficient. Its real community centred on the market town, which was, of course, within walking distance not more than two or three miles away, so that a family member might go there and return on a periodic market day. The schedule of markets in one town, say on the third, sixth and eighth days of the ten-day cycle, would be integrated with the schedules of the adjacent towns, which might have their markets on the second, fourth, seventh and ninth days, or the third, fifth, eighth and tenth days of the cycle. In this way itinerant pedlars and merchants who operated out of a still larger market centre, could make the rounds of the market towns in its region. The lowest level or standard market town was usually surrounded by a dozen or eighteen villages, totalling perhaps fifteen hundred households or seven thousand people. From one of these village households an able-bodied male through the years might visit the market town a thousand times, and thus in its tea houses, its local temple or its occasional fairs and holiday celebrations have an opportunity to meet a large proportion of his market community.

The basis of this community was not only economic – to exchange surplus farm or handicraft products so as to secure paper, iron implements, ceramic-ware or other imports – but also social. Since many villages were dominated by one kinship group, the rule of exogamous marriage led families to seek brides in other villages, usually through market town matchmakers. A secret society lodge, if present, would normally be centred in the market town, and there also the peasant would meet any local members of the ruling class or representatives of officialdom.[3]

[3] G. W. Skinner, 'Marketing and social structure in rural China', *JAS*, 24.1 (1964).