Qing Responses to Western Imperialism
Primary Sources

Document 1

Excerpt from “Learning from the West” by Yan Fu

From China’s Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923, by Ssu-yü Teng and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 150-151. ©1979 Harvard University Press.

Introduction

As the Qing empire suffered military defeat and economic encroachment at the hands of the Western powers and Japan in the nineteenth century, Chinese scholars searched for the roots of their country’s weakness, for the keys to the power of the West and Japan, and thus for whatever actions the Qing empire and the Chinese people could take in order to make their country rich, powerful, and able to stand up to external enemies.

In the essay from which the excerpts below were taken, Yan discusses learning from the West in terms of two concepts from Chinese philosophy: yong (concrete techniques) and ti (the cultural foundation or context of those techniques).

Excerpts from “Learning from the West”

I think the greatest difference between China and the West, which can never be made up, is that the Chinese are fond of antiquity but neglect the present. The Westerners are struggling in the present in order to supersede the past. Chinese consider that a period of order and a period of disorder, and a period of prosperity and a period of decline are the natural course of heavenly conduct of human affairs; while Westerners consider that daily progress should be endless, and that what has already been prosperous will not decline, and that when things are well governed, they will not be in disorder again — all of which they take as an absolute law of academic thought and political ideas. …

The foundation [ti] and the use [yong] mean the same thing. The body of an ox should have the use of carrying heavy things; the body of a horse should have the use of carrying something to a distance. I have never heard that the ox is the body or the foundation, while the horse is for use. The difference between Chinese and Western knowledge is as great as that between the complexions and the eyes of the two races. We cannot force the two cultures to be the same or similar. Therefore, Chinese knowledge has its foundation and function; Western knowledge has also its foundation and function. If the two are separated, each can be independent; if the two were combined, both would perish. …

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Document 2:

Excerpt from “On the adoption of Western Learning” by Feng Guifen

From Changing China: Readings in the History of China from the Opium War to the Present, by J. Mason Gentzler (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1977), 70-71. ©1977 Praeger Publishers.

Introduction

In the aftermath of Qing defeat in the Opium War (1839-1842) and the Arrow War (1856-1859), a number of Qing officials put forth and put into action proposals meant to increase the empire’s military strength by adopting Western military and industrial technology and other Western techniques.

Feng Guifen (1809-1874) was one of the leaders of this effort. Feng was a classically educated scholar who had a successful career as an official in his own right, but also as an advisor to the leading Qing statesmen of the mid-nineteenth century.

Excerpts from “On the Adoption of Western Learning”

Books on mathematics, mechanics, optics, light, chemistry, and others all contain the
ultimate principles of understanding things. Most of this information is unavailable to people in China. …

I have heard that with their new methods the Westerners have found that the movements of the earth conform closely to those of the heavens. This can be of assistance in fixing the calendar. … I have heard that the Westerners’ method of clearing sand from harbors is very effective. … This can be of assistance to keep the water flowing. Also, for agricultural
and sericultural tools, and things required for the various crafts, they mostly use mechanical wheels, which require little energy but accomplish much. …

There are many intelligent people in China. Surely there are some who, having learned
from the barbarians, can surpass them …