

Historical Background

The Great Exhibition on the Works of Industry of All Nations opened with great fanfare on May 1, 1851, inside a massive structure called the Crystal Palace built within London's Hyde Park. It was an impressive affair, displaying over 100,000 technological and other objects from around the world. But that stunning spectacle was really aimed at showing the world the sheer ingenuity and superiority of British achievements, for half the space was taken up by exhibits of British industrial machinery and design.

The Exhibition, first announced in 1849, was the brainchild of Prince Albert, the Prince Consort. He had conceived it as the great end towards which human history was supposedly pointing -- "the realisation of the unity of mankind."

The cream of Victorian society greeted the show with unfeigned enthusiasm. That was a time filled with a heady belief in the possibility of human progress, due to advances in science, technology and economic arrangements.

Nonetheless, the Exhibition provoked some controversy. A few sour notes were sounded. Karl Marx, for instance, dismissed it as a mere emblem of capitalist fetishism. The followers of the ideas of Rousseau rejected the notion that progress and human happiness could be secured through civilisation corrupting the freedom and dignity of the noble savage.

Newspapers of the era were overwhelmingly supportive, however, with editorials brimming with optimism and uplifting sentiments. The *Times* asserted the Exhibition foreshadowed universal peace. Presumably the writer had in mind some sort of *Pax Britannica* imposed through British military might. Such hyperboles, unfortunately, bore little resemblance to the realities in the semi-colonised and yet-to-be-colonised parts of the world.

People like my forebears living in China were unlikely to have heard of Prince Albert's ideas or the trumpeting newspaper editorials. If they had, they would have had difficulty figuring out how the "unity of mankind" and

“universal peace” could possibly apply to them. They were in an impoverished agricultural environment, where the capriciousness of nature repeatedly brought hunger, injury, homelessness, epidemics and other dislocations to life.

Widespread corruption, bureaucratic bullying, drug addiction, rebellion, seizure of property and forceful conscriptions by warlords and bandits, as well as the random forfeiture of life, were everyday occurrences.

Oral family history indicated that my more recent ancestors had been spared much of that iliad of woes. They had not been persecuted for their religious beliefs, like the Huguenots, or starved, like the Irish during the Potato Famine. They had enjoyed for the most part the security and comfort of a middle class life. So why had so many of them chosen to leave China to chance their arm in foreign-administered places like Hong Kong, Singapore and elsewhere?

During my matured years, I had tried to nail down their motives. I met with little success, for I had started my quest too late, after most of the main players had passed from the scene. Much of the comments and observations I now offer are based more on inferences, deductions and speculations rather than hard, provable facts.

A potted account of the social, political and economic history of China during the nineteenth century may nevertheless provide a useful backdrop. A note of caution ought to be sounded, however. Historical accounts, no matter how well-meaning, are *inevitably* biased, if only in the way certain facts are chosen or omitted. My efforts are no exception. I have selected materials which, in my opinion, had been relevant to the lives of my forebears or which might have affected their decisions. My presentation must therefore necessarily be of a boutique version of history, not necessarily to everybody’s taste. My interpretations are also strictly my own.

I shall begin arbitrarily, around 1839, the year China stumbled into

the first of the so-called opium wars with Britain.

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Even before the start of the First Opium War, the Manchu Ching Dynasty was already in decline, having been in power for almost 200 years. Its once-fierce Manchu Bannermen were no longer in fighting condition, their military ardour having been leached away through widespread drug-taking, indifferent leadership and poor living conditions. Pay for the ordinary soldier, for instance, had not been re-adjusted for more than a century! Some had taken to becoming part-time robbers, which merely served to alienate the citizenry further. Manchu rulers had grown increasingly effete and out of touch. Though they had adopted many Chinese habits and attitudes, large segments of popular sentiments still regarded them as “foreigners”.

The general poverty among peasants, which formed the bulk of the population, was being aggravated by population increases. They had progressively to feed more mouths on existing plots. There had been little new infrastructure development to open up new land for cultivation or to provide alternative employment for the growing labour pool. River channels, dykes and irrigation systems had not been properly maintained, leading to droughts, floods, landslides and other natural disasters. As a result, famines, diseases and deaths became common features of life.

Desperate for funds to cope with such deteriorating conditions, the central authorities, like other empires in decline, resorted to selling public offices. In China, that led to an increase in corruption, official abuses and outlandish demands for taxes. There were reported cases of peasants being dunned for taxes 30 years in advance!

The economy naturally spluttered and stagnated. Rebellions flared

and, if it had not been for a certain inbred streak of fatalism in the Chinese character, there would have been many more of them.

For thousands of years, the Chinese have been schooled in the concept of dynastic cycles, that is, on how an emperor was supposed to derive his right to rule through a “Mandate of Heaven”. Underlying the concept was an implied compact between the ruler and the ruled. The emperor was supposed to guide the nation wisely and virtuously, like the good father of a family, and thereby earn the loyalty, obedience and support of his subjects or children.

Should the emperor and his officials neglect their duties, such as the maintenance of public order and fair taxes, then disasters in the form of floods, droughts, pestilences and earthquakes would occur -- supposedly inflicted by Heaven for misgovernment. If such calamities happened with uncommon frequency, that would signal a ruler’s loss of his mandate. It would then be legitimate to rebel and to choose a new emperor. Such a socio-political framework still colours many Chinese attitudes today.

Up till the nineteenth century, Western intrusions into Chinese society had been limited. Though Westerners had long sought to develop trading relationships, Chinese Confucian traditions disdained money-grubbing activities. Officials therefore looked upon foreigners so engaged as “barbarians”, to be kept at arm’s length or at least under some form of tributary arrangement.

Many countries seeking trade with China were at first not averse to paying tributes, for they realised it could be materially advantageous. Because of an oriental obsession with “face”, Chinese emperors usually handed out “gifts” far exceeding the value of any tribute received. Hence foreigners for a time accepted the Chinese rules of the game. They also put up with being restricted to designated locations for trading purposes. Europeans were confined to Macau and Canton.

As the West prospered, national pride and military muscle caused

hubris and appetites to grow. European societies sought silks, tea, porcelain, lacquerware and other exotic goods. The Chinese, in keeping with their usual smugness, showed little interest in receiving “barbarian” products in exchange.

Britain was particularly affected by that lopsided trade. Since goods had to be paid for, vast amounts of silver began flowing eastwards, to the consternation of the British Treasury. Merchants in the East India Company soon hit upon an idea for redressing that imbalance -- by increasing the sale of opium to China. The very high profit margins attending the trade were not lost on anyone.

Opium had been known to the Chinese for centuries. Small quantities had been imported since ancient times for medicinal purposes. A succession of emperors, empresses and royal concubines also experimented with its recreational possibilities. As with our current celebrity culture, the indulgences of royalty were soon aped by those lower down the pecking order. Courtiers, eunuchs, mandarins and wealthy merchants took to the opium pipe as well. The habit spread.

The Chinese Court was not unaware of this looming danger. As early as 1729, when only a few hundred chests were being imported -- a chest being the equivalent of 140 pounds -- an imperial edict had been issued banning the sale of opium and the opening of new opium dens. But the edict was more often ignored than enforced. By 1790, annual imports had reached 4,000 chests. They soon catapulted into the tens of thousands. Increased supplies brought the price of a pipe dream within the reach of the poorest. The drug became referred to as “foreign mud”.

By December of 1838, the Ching emperor became sufficiently exercised by the problem to appoint a Confucian scholar by the name of Lin Tse-Hsu as a Commissioner to curb the trade. Lin lost no time in carrying out his task. He intercepted some British ships bringing in opium and ordered their

cargoes to be handed over. Their British owners refused and a six-week stalemate ensued.

To end the impasse, Captain Charles Elliot, the British Superintendent of Trade in China, persuaded the merchants to comply by promising compensation from the British government for any loss. A total of 2.7 million pounds, or well in excess of 19,000 chests of opium, was duly surrendered. Lin ceremoniously destroyed the lot.

It soon became apparent, however, that the British government was in no position to honour the promised compensation. The British narrative took a subtle shift, linking the surrender of the drugs to issues like free trade, legal jurisdiction, the sanctity of private property, the right to fair compensation, and so forth.

When Britain demanded payment, the Chinese government, unsurprisingly, refused. British naval forces then shelled a number of Chinese coastal cities, acts which would probably amount in today's jurisprudence to "state terrorism" or "crimes against humanity". Thus the First Opium War started.

To justify the hostilities, Lord Palmerston, the then Foreign Secretary, asserted that Britain was defending the principle of free trade. However, William Gladstone, then a young Member of Parliament, declared that it was "a war more unjust in its origins, a war more calculated to cover this country with permanent disgrace," than he ever knew.

The war was ended in 1842 with the signing of the Treaty of Nanking. Under its terms, China ceded Hong Kong Island to Britain, agreed to open five Chinese ports to foreign trade, pay an indemnity of US\$21 million, and conceded extraterritorial rights. The last had the effect of removing foreigners on Chinese soil from the jurisdiction of Chinese law. Britain also sought the legalisation of opium but China refused.

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The dust of that war had hardly settled before the wheels of the old fabled dynastic cycle started another turn. Rural hardships led to the outbreak in 1850 of a civil war known as the Taiping Rebellion, affecting mainly areas south of the Yangtse River.

That rebellion was led by a failed Confucian scholar named Hung Hsiu-Chuan who claimed to be the younger brother of Jesus. He touted a quixotic programme that included a new pseudo-religion, the suppression of opium smoking, gambling and prostitution, equality for women and segregation of the sexes. Some elements of the programme apparently did not apply to the leaders, for most of them enjoyed the favours of several wives. They called their regime the “Heavenly Kingdom of Peace” and chose Nanking as their capital.

The movement was peasant-based and it enjoyed some initial successes. The rebels, for instance, allowed the formation and deployment of a totally female fighting unit, which comprehensively bested in close-combat the male military forces sent against them. Latter-day feminists in Western countries, struggling for equal opportunities to serve in their military establishments, seemed to have made little play of their Chinese sisters’ achievement more than one and a half centuries earlier.

The rebellion continued till 1864, before it was ended with the aid of British and French military officers. Some remnants, nonetheless, remained active in border regions till 1871.

Some historians have considered the Taiping Rebellion the deadliest uprising in human history based on the number of lives lost, variously estimated at between 20 and 25 million. The high death rates stemmed from both sides wanting to deprive the other of human resources to continue the fight. So

prisoners and residents of captured cities were routinely put to the sword.

Meanwhile, two other rebellions also flared -- the Nien Rebellion in 1853 and the Panthay Rebellion in 1855. The former was not ended till 1868 and the latter till 1873.

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While those various bloodbaths were in progress, another war erupted in 1856 between Britain and China. The origins were as muddled and ridiculous as those of the First Opium War.

The Treaty of Nanking had left the drug trade in a twilight zone. Though China had refused to legalise the trade, the conscientious Commissioner Lin nonetheless lost his job. Later generations, however, were to honour him as a national hero by erecting monuments to his memory. The British government and the opium traders, for their part, felt their trade had been vindicated by military victory.

In such an unclear situation, most Western entrepreneurs sought to expand their trade, aiming for growth, market penetration, economies of scale, enhanced bottom lines and all those other goals desired by normal businessmen. Their rough-and-ready practices were later refined into those nuggets of commercial wisdom dispensed at expensive Western business schools. Only the Quakers refrained from the opium trade as a matter of principle. They even refused to carry the drug on their ships.

From the point of view of Chinese officialdom, opium was still a proscribed product, though blind eyes might be turned if palms were sufficiently greased. Intellectuals and patriots, on the other hand, continued to fume over their government's inability to curb the importation and distribution of "foreign mud".

British merchants danced around the shifting line separating the legal from the illegal by resorting to technical subterfuges. While not soiling their own hands, they engaged Chinese smugglers, pirates and underworld types to get their drugs through the Chinese embargo. Since extraterritorial rights provided loopholes, traffickers registered as British the vessels carrying the contraband.

A cat-and-mouse game ensued between opium smugglers and enforcement officials. In 1856, some officials chanced upon a vessel operated by a gang of Chinese pirates. The vessel was called the *Arrow* and it was flying a British flag. It was boarded, the flag was pulled down and three of the gang leaders were promptly executed.

The British Consul in Canton at the time went by the name of Harry Parkes. He demanded an apology and the release of the ship and crew. The Chinese refused, though at one point they did consider the possibility of releasing the crew to mollify the British. The rub was that three of them had already been dispatched! One Chinese official came up with the idea of substituting three other Chinese, on the basis that foreigners often claimed that all Chinese looked alike!

A closer examination of the facts suggested the Chinese had acted within their rights. Although the *Arrow* had once been registered as a British ship, that registration had expired for weeks. Hence the ship had no legal claim to being either British nor to fly the British ensign. Moreover, since the vessel was not British, no extraterritorial rights were involved. The crew members were clearly engaged in activities considered illegal under Chinese law.

When those facts became known to Parkes, he refused to back down. Personal and national *amour-propre* had become involved. When a Chinese apology was not forthcoming, he directed the British Navy to bombard Canton, then a city of a million people. A considerable number of civilians were killed and injured as a consequence. The Chinese, now also agitated, maintained their

refusal to apologise.

When the matter came before the British Cabinet, many ministers, including the Attorney General, thought the actions of Parkes both legally and morally wrong. But Lord Palmerston, now the Prime Minister, supported the consul. In a parliamentary debate, he even dismissed the Chinese as “a set of kidnapping, murdering, poisoning barbarians”.

It was in such a tragic-comic fashion the fuse to the Second Opium War was lit.

Western naval forces began shelling cities and fortifications up and down the China coast as they did during the First Opium War. A land invasion was then mounted. When the invaders entered Peking, British and French troops looted and set fire to the Summer Palace. The Palace complex was so large and so full of treasures that it took three days to loot and to burn down. Looted items made steady appearances in European auction sales for decades afterwards.

The war was ended in 1860, with the Treaty of Tientsin. Under its terms, China was required to accept, among other things, the ceding of the Kowloon Peninsula to Britain, the opening of more Chinese ports to foreign trade, the extension of extraterritorial jurisdiction to more locations in China, and -- at last -- the legalisation of the opium trade.

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The two Opium Wars had profound effects on China. For a start, they exposed the country's utter weakness and inability to defend itself. Other foreign powers quickly took the cue.

Russia was quick off the mark. It took advantage of China's entanglement in the Second Opium War and the Taiping Rebellion to impose the Treaty of Aigun in 1858, under which it gained some 231,000 square miles of

Chinese territory north of the Amur River.

The French followed up by getting a part of Shameen as a concession in 1859 and then another concession in Tientsin in 1860. It also occupied in 1862 significant parts of what is today known as northern Vietnam, then part of the Chinese vassal state of Annam.

That same year, Portugal confirmed its occupation of Macau and Britain annexed Lower Burma, another Chinese vassal state.

Another unsettling effect was caused by the exposure of ordinary peasants to the presence of Westerners. Previously, the few entering the country tended to be Christian missionaries, like the Nestorians during the Tang Dynasty and the Jesuits during the Ming Dynasty. They confined themselves to urban centres and couched their messages in terms familiar to the Confucian elites. In that way, they gained acceptance and later, after they had demonstrated their scientific knowledge, also imperial patronage.

But the arrivals during the Ching Dynasty involved more than just missionaries. The large numbers of arrivals included diplomats, soldiers, businessmen, ideologues, rogues, hustlers and assorted gentlefolk. They all came enjoying immunity from Chinese law conferred by extraterritorial rights. Many dreamt largely of riches and adventures they could recount to dining companions back home. They knew little or nothing about China and most were not keen to know. Some assumed the attitudes of freshly-installed lords, selflessly taking up what they conceived as the white man's burden. They were the forerunners of Colonel Blimps.

Among those prone to put on airs were some missionaries, especially those from the Catholic Church. France had secured for them, through a dubious rendering of certain treaty provisions, the right to live outside treaty ports. Missionaries of other denominations soon jumped on the bandwagon to demand the same right.

Subsequently, France also gained for the Catholic clergy recognition of the ranks they had simply arrogated to themselves. A bishop, for example, would hold himself as on a par with the governor of a Chinese province, and so forth down the scales of both hierarchies. Armed with such ranks, Catholic clergymen began intervening on behalf of their flocks in family and clan feuds. They also tried to convert disused temples into churches. When meeting opposition, they would pull rank over village elders and local officials, much to the chagrin of the latter.

Even the building of a new church presented problems not always appreciated by foreigners. Crosses and spires clashed with traditional concerns over *fung sui* or geomancy, aimed at promoting environmental harmony. Sentiments back then would be akin to those in Western communities today when a mosque is about to be erected in their neighbourhood.

Similar *fung sui* objections attended the erection of telegraph poles and the excavations in mining. In an ancient and heavily populated land, it would be virtually impossible for railway tracks to be laid without removing or desecrating ancestral tombs. The worship of ancestors had been ingrained in the Chinese since time immemorial. Disturbing ancestral tombs and preaching against worshipping them merely added to the resentments against foreigners in rural communities.

A measure of the general distrust might be gauged from some of the rumours surrounding orphanages opened to care for baby girls, frequently abandoned or sold by impoverished countryfolk. The rites of baptism and extreme unction administered by missionaries to dying infants soon became misrepresented as arcane foreign rituals carried out for diabolical purposes. Sadly, such rumours were often believed and they detracted from the positive contributions made to Chinese life, like the establishment of schools and colleges to accord free or affordable education to the masses.

Many generations of my own family, including myself and my children, have benefitted from such missionary-sponsored education. I consider such education a crucial stepping-stone towards speeding China along the road to modernisation.

Other positive contributions were not free from criticisms either. Take the case of the Imperial Maritime Customs Service. In 1854, China was beset by foreign wars and internal uprisings so that it was unable to collect trade taxes. The Western consuls in Shanghai formed an organisation to carry out that function. The job was so effectively done that, over time, the service was given additional duties like running the postal system, administering harbours and waterways, providing weather reports, masterminding currency reforms and conducting anti-smuggling operations.

Notwithstanding its wide-ranging work, the Maritime Customs attracted resentments from the intelligentsia. Since its inception, it had been controlled and managed entirely by foreigners, largely British, almost like a colonial administration instead of a Chinese organ of state. By the end of the nineteenth century, it had a staff of approximately 5,500, of whom the top 20% were foreigners. That establishment grew steadily into tens of thousands, to operate 40 Custom Houses across the country. But not a single Chinese was admitted into its senior management till 1929, the year of my birth.

My British godfather worked for years at the Canton station of the service and, for a time, so did my mother and one of my maternal uncles.

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After the French had occupied parts of Annam in 1862, they pursued an ambition to establish a land route to Yunnan through that country, to bypass the British dominated treaty ports. But in doing so, they had to contend with

Chinese militia forces because Annam was still regarded as a Chinese vassal state. Skirmishes inevitably occurred. They multiplied and ultimately resulted in the Sino-French War of 1884.

During that brief conflict, French naval forces managed to destroy the highly-touted Chinese Fukien Fleet with surprising ease. Part of the reason was due to the segregation of Chinese armed forces into separate independent regional commands following the Taiping Rebellion. The different commanders were often rivals, averse to co-operating with one another. Moreover, the men they commanded were badly trained and demoralised.

The destruction of the Fukien Fleet shocked the nation. The conflict ended with China giving up its suzerainty over Annam altogether and acknowledging it as a French protectorate. Those developments sparked an upsurge in anti-foreign sentiments. Westerners were attacked in foreign concessions and treaty ports. Strikes and rioting broke out in Hong Kong and they were bloodily suppressed.

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While the Europeans were pressuring China to open up to trade, the United States was pursuing a similar strategy in Japan. Sections of its elite were already thinking in terms of a wider manifested destiny for their newly founded republic. But it was not till Commodore Matthew Perry turned up in 1853 with a squadron of black-hulled ships and with instructions to use force if necessary that the Tokugawa Shogunate yielded.

The Japanese reaction to the advent of Westerners was different from that of the Chinese. Being of more warlike inclinations, the Japanese quickly recognised the technological and military superiority of Westerners and decided to learn from them. They sent students and delegations across the globe, to

acquire naval skills from the British and military training from the French and the Prussians. They therefore adapted their armed forces to the needs of modern warfare much quicker than the Chinese.

They also noted the political and strategic winds were shifting. Chinese power was evaporating before their eyes, while the British lion appeared to be losing its grip from being too well fed for too long. Hungrier predators were on the prowl. Should the Korean peninsula fall under the sway of an expansionist Western power, Japanese interests could be seriously compromised, especially since the peninsula was poised geographically like “a dagger pointed at the heart of Japan”.

The Korean court was split at the time between a conservative pro-Chinese faction and a pro-Japanese faction. The Japanese thought they might play a hand in the expansionist game themselves and began cultivating allies at the Korean court.

When the Tonghak Rebellion broke out in 1894, the Korean king appealed for Chinese help. The Chinese accordingly sent troops. But the Japanese went one better. They sent troops to seize the king and replaced the government with pro-Japan ministers. China rejected the legitimacy of such a government and the stage was set for war.

On paper, the Chinese forces appeared vastly stronger. In reality, the fragmented regional commands and the jealousies between their commanders made a united response impossible. Low pay, opium-smoking and corruption had sapped the morale of Chinese forces. Funds meant for military purposes had been syphoned off for other uses. Even money for the purchase of ammunition had become unavailable since 1891.

Responsibility for defending Chinese interests in the Korean sphere fell to the Beiyang Army and the Beiyang Fleet. The warships of the fleet, though modern, had been appallingly maintained. Rubbish had been allowed to

be dumped into gun barrels and, in the case of one battleship, one of its guns had actually been pawned by its own admiral!

When war was declared in August of 1894, eight out of the 10 warships in the Beiyang Fleet were quickly destroyed. Lessons from the loss of the Fukien Fleet had not been learnt. On the ground, Chinese troops were no match for the modernised Japanese. Both foreign observers and Chinese citizens were shocked. Many could not understand how a former tributary state could humble China with such ease.

The country had no alternative but to sue for peace. Under the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki of 1895, China had to cede Taiwan and the Penghu Islands.

Those significant losses of territory set off more outrage and even sharper anti-foreign feelings within China. In the face of the continuing dismemberment of the nation, revolutionary sentiments burgeoned. Many students of that era, including my grandfather, began to regard the replacement of the Ching Dynasty with a republic as the only means of restoring the health and dignity of the nation.

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The staggering defeat by Japan invited a fresh international scramble for spoils. Over the next two years, foreign powers carved out for themselves tracts of territory euphemistically referred to as “spheres of interest” or “spheres of influence”.

Russia was once again quick off the mark. It secured in 1896 control over Chinese territory through which the Trans-Siberian Railway had its tracks. Later, it claimed the whole of Manchuria as its “sphere”.

Germany claimed Shantung Province while the French tried to mark

out the provinces of Yunnan, Kwangsi, Kwangtung and Hainan for domination. In addition, France secured in Kwangtung a lease of 500 square miles of territory at Kwang Chou Wan, which it called Fort Bayard, and gained a further concession in Hankow.

The United States, though a late-comer to the scramble, demanded and received a range of special privileges too. This was achieved through the diplomatic gambit of demanding “most favoured nation” treatment. In legal terms, it meant that any privilege extracted by other powers, through fair means or foul, had to be extended to America.

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One would have thought this recital of defeats and woes, all within a few decades, ought to be misfortune enough for any country. But more was to come. A severe drought descended upon North China in 1897. When the drought ended, floods followed. The two calamities destroyed 1,500 villages, left 2,500 square miles of land under water and turned hordes of peasants into homeless refugees.

In the midst of such devastations, the so-called Boxers materialised like apparitions. They were members of a little known seventeenth century secret society called the Society of Righteous Harmonious Fists. They practised certain forms of martial arts which, they claimed, could make them invulnerable to bullets. One Boxer sought to demonstrate such prowess by placing himself in front of the mouth of a cannon before it was discharged. He was duly blown to bits. The explanation given was that the poor man had failed to recite the correct incantations and to perform the proper rites beforehand. It is doubtful that any of the Boxers would have stood half a chance against a Bruce Lee.

The Boxers went around the countryside blaming the natural

disasters and the other ails of the nation on the presence of foreigners, their “foreign mud” and their alien religion. They also asserted that once foreigners and their Christian supporters had been expelled or eliminated, the nation would be purified. One of their early slogans proclaimed: “Defend Chinese Religion, Get Rid of Foreign Religion”.

They were able to tap into a significant seam of popular feeling. They found adherents not only among ordinary people but also within the Manchu court itself, particularly in the person of the Empress Dowager, who shared their hatred of foreigners. She was superstitious enough to half-believe in some of their claims. Egged on by xenophobic advisors, she decided to support them. The Boxers responded by changing their slogan to: “Support Ching, destroy foreigners”.

Thus encouraged, the Boxers, joined by dispossessed farmers, began attacking missionary compounds and killing as many Westerners and Chinese Christians as they could find.

The international diplomatic corps, ensconced in a world as artificial and detached as that of the Manchu court, seemed blithely unfazed by the terrible blood storm edging ever closer to the capital. Towards the end of May of 1900, after almost two years of desultory reports of killings of Chinese Christians in locations with names barely familiar to diplomats, the big talking point among members of the corps and their ladies was a dinner dance to be hosted by the British minister to mark the 81st birthday of Queen Victoria.

By June, the Boxers had gathered sufficient momentum to enter Peking itself and to lay siege to the foreign legation quarter. As a prelude, four French and Belgium railway engineers had been killed. They were the first foreign victims. A German envoy, on his way to lodge a protest, was waylaid and killed, not by a Boxer but by a Manchu Bannerman acting as a state-sponsored assassin. When rumours circulated that foreign powers were planning

a joint ultimatum to the Chinese, the Empress Dowager seized the initiative and declared war on the eight foreign powers with diplomatic representation in the capital, that is, Japan, Russia, France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Britain and the United States.

The siege of the legation quarter lasted 55 days. Why the defenders managed to hold out for so long and why the outcome had not been more sanguinary constitute another fascinating account of how history is often made. It depended upon the action or inaction of individuals. The Chinese had overwhelming force, for imperial regulars had joined the Boxers. They had an arsenal of modern Krupp cannons which were not deployed. Their attacks were often half-hearted and had been broken off at crucial stages.

It became clear after the event that less fanatical heads within the administration foresaw the suicidal consequences should the foreign envoys and their families be actually massacred. Edicts were therefore implemented in such a fashion as to allow time for other domestic and international forces to come into play. Orders to send troops were tardily implemented.

During the fighting, the magnificent buildings in Hanlin Yuan, adjacent to the legation quarter, were progressively set on fire by the Boxers in spite of one of them being the oldest and richest libraries in the world. They wanted the fire to spread next door to the legation buildings. Despite the heroic efforts by many of the besieged to put out the flames, few of the books, manuscripts, bundles of hand-carved bamboo strips recording writings from antiquity and other treasures could be saved. It was a self-inflicted cultural catastrophe of the first order.

The human toll of the Boxer upheaval came to several hundred foreigners killed and in excess of 30,000 Chinese Christians slaughtered.

Troops of the allied powers wrought vengeance afterwards, by unleashing fresh orgies of murder and looting in the capital and in the

surrounding villages. The worst outrages were committed by German troops under the command of General Alfred Graf von Waldersee, who, echoing the Kaiser, declared his intention to leave in China a fear of Germans as long-lasting as that left by Attila in Europe.

No record exists of the number killed by foreign soldiers or by the missionaries and diplomats who had joined in the looting and murders. General Chaffee, the head of the American relief contingent, remarked that for every genuine Boxer executed, probably 15 innocent peasants lost their lives. A journalist called George Lynch was moved to say that “there are things that I must not write, and that may not be printed in England, which would seem to show that this Western civilisation of ours is merely a veneer over savagery.”

The entire episode was labelled as the Boxer Rebellion, though there had in fact been no rebellion against the Chinese government. The Boxers had targeted only foreigners and Christian converts.

The Boxer Protocol of September 7, 1901, brought a formal conclusion to the whole ghastly affair. It included a demand for the execution of a number of high Chinese officials who had supported the Boxers. Well over a hundred officials of different ranks stoically forfeited their lives, a number through suicides and the rest through decapitation. None descended to the indignity of trying to make a run for it, even when opportunities presented themselves.

Other provisions included the stationing of foreign troops in Peking and the payment of indemnity to the eight foreign nations involved. The sum was set at £67,000,000 and 450 million *taels* of silver, with an annual interest rate of 4%. (A *tael* is a Chinese unit of measure for weight, around 1.2 ounces or 38 grams.)

China kept paying that indemnity till 1939. By then, together with interest, it had handed over 668 million *taels* of silver or 801 million ounces.

Calculated at today's silver prices, the value of the indemnity would burn a hole in anybody's pocket.

To their credit, Britain and the United States used their shares of the indemnity to pay for scholarships for Chinese students.

The Boxer Rebellion was by no means the last of the humiliations, defeats and annexations to be suffered by China. Those continued well into the twentieth century. But that is another story.

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The thoughts of my forebears as they lived through those turbulent times can only be speculated upon. They might have viewed the successive disasters befalling their country as part and parcel of the dynastic cycle which had been operating for thousands of years.

Nationalism was still an unripe fruit for most Chinese at that time. As Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, the Father of the Chinese Republic, was later to observe, the Chinese nation had about as much cohesion as a dish of sand.

Until the overt commitment to revolution by my paternal grandfather, I imagine my ancestors' thoughts had probably revolved around getting themselves and their dependents out of harm's way. That is the best I can offer to explain why so many of them left China.

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The earliest ancestor of whom I have some oral history was my great-grandfather. But the references to him had been so sparse that he remains lodged in our collective memory like a shadow, a part of an unsolvable puzzle or a story cut off half-told.

It was he who had begun the process of turning his descendants into nomads and wanderers, forever yearning for some out-of-reach place to embrace as home. The subsequent chimera of globalised capitalism merely exerted fresh pressures towards dispersal and the slow disintegration of our family.

So far as can be determined, he never returned to Hsin Hui or to any other part of China, not even for a visit. Like any normal parent, he had prepared his sons with skills for earning decent livings elsewhere. Apart from my grandfather, his eldest son also qualified as a doctor of Western medicine and migrated to San Francisco. His second son became a dentist and made his home in the Malayan tin mining town of Ipoh.

An interesting question arises as to how my great-grandfather managed to put three sons through university on the meagre income of a school master. My theory is that he fell back on certain family resources. That supposition is derived from the possibility that his father, my great-great-grandfather, had held some position as an official in Manchu times.

That theory is based on the existence of two portrait paintings of an aged gentleman and a lady in the reception room of my grandfather's home in Singapore. The gentleman wore a wispy beard and was depicted in a surcoat with an erect collar and wide sleeves. There was an embroidered square which featured a feathered creature amidst clouds, plants and other decorative trimmings in front of the coat. The square was a Ching Dynasty designation of bureaucratic office. The lady was dressed in a plain black satin gown.

I once asked one of my aunts whether the portraits represented our grandfather's parents. She said they did not, because my grandfather's father was a teacher. They must have been more remote ancestors, otherwise their portraits would not be hanging in the home.

If that had indeed been the case, it would have been rare during the nineteenth century for a Chinese official, regardless of rank or honesty, not to

accumulate some nest egg for his children. Thus the possibility arises of my great-grandfather inheriting enough for the education of his sons.

I, of course, had no knowledge during my childhood of the Ching bureaucratic emblems or their division into nine ranks, with a different bird on the square to denote each. They ranged from a crane for the top rank and a golden pheasant for the second, to a quail for the eighth and a paradise flycatcher for the lowest level. By the time I had developed such an interest, both portraits had disappeared. Hence I never discovered how senior or lowly in rank my remote ancestor had been.

But a plausible theory to explain one puzzle often creates other questions. For instance, since my great-grandfather had been brought up with a Confucian education, why had he never return to his ancestral home? Surely if his parents were alive, filial piety would require him to pay his respects. If they were dead, he would have to sweep their tombs at Ching Ming. And allowing his own sons to be scattered far and wide also seemed contrary to normal Chinese behaviour.

Some other plausible explanations can be advanced. If his father had been an imperial official, the prevailing rules would have barred him from holding office in his native county or province. Those rules were in place to avoid conflicts of interest and possible favouritism towards locals. The post might have been in a remote and difficult to reach part of the empire, far removed from Hsin Hui. Chinese poetry is replete with the laments of those separated from their families by the calls of duty.

There are yet more dire possibilities. His father might have fallen out of favour with the court. In those days, to act contrary to the directions of the emperor amounted to the crime of sedition for which the penalty was death. Punishments could also be extended to family members. My great-grandfather might well have been told to get himself out of harm's way in the newly-

established British colony. An even worse possibility might be that his parents had already perished during the massacres of the Taiping Rebellion, leaving not even corpses to be sent home for burial.

But all those are mere conjectures, the kind of depressing mental games one might play on a sleepless night.