

## *A Review*

By William Dockery

### I

Since its first edition in 1970, The Rise of Modern China by Immanuel C. Y. Hsu has been acclaimed as the most authoritative survey in the field of Modern Chinese history. Professor Hsu incorporated the research of hundreds of Chinese and Western scholars into his work and produced a lengthy but readable history of China from the beginnings of the Qing dynasty down to the People's Republic. A third edition has recently been issued. Readers, even if they already possess an earlier edition of this volume, should consider purchasing this one as well. Both its reasonable price (HK\$ 67.50) and various changes make it worth owning.

The author has not merely appended new material to the end of the book to bring it nearer to the present day; he has also made changes in the rest of the text and these changes are to the good. The third edition is actually a bit shorter than the second one, though one should not quibble; at 930 pages it is still a bargain. This modest condensation

has resulted from Professor Hsu's deletion of some material included in earlier editions. For instance, the first major section of the book, "The Persistence of Traditional Institutions, 1600-1800", has been cut by about 25 per cent. This is of undoubted help to a student who must plough through this book in a course on modern Chinese history; it is something of a loss to the scholar or advanced student of history who may treasure illustrative detail. On the whole, it is a constructive change - Professor Hsu has wielded a scalpel rather than an axe, and no essential material has been eliminated.

The lengthy bibliographies which follow each chapter have also been updated. These lists alone make the book worth having. They are also heartening evidence of the increasing amount of scholarly endeavour which has recently been devoted to Chinese history. Many new works have been published since the book's second edition in 1975. Some might comment on the paucity of Japanese works on modern China and others might charge that Hsu has not always taken into account the insights and interpretations of the new works he cites in the body of the text. Nonetheless, it is rare for a "survey" such as this to contain so much bibliographic material and we should be grateful to the author for providing us this extensive guide to further reading.

## II

One chapter which has not changed since 1975 is the first: "A Conceptual Framework of Modern China." This is not meant as criticism. Hsu carefully formulated this schema earlier and has chosen to stand by it.

It is worth taking a close look at it since it affords us an overview of the whole volume, which is so long that a careful review of the entire text would be by itself of book length, and because it underlines the strengths and weaknesses of Hsu's approach.

He begins by stressing that until early modern times (1500) China's development had been largely indigenous; after that, increasing contact with the West and, in 1644, the arrival of the Manchus precipitated a new era in Chinese history. That things changed rapidly after the arrival of these two alien forces is beyond dispute. However, we must remember that Chinese society, like any society, changed constantly, if slowly, over the course of its 4000 years of history. The continuity of many aspects of Chinese culture is truly impressive, but the myth of a "changeless China" with its history cyclically repeating itself from the



Tang to the Song and the Ming to the Qing must be put to rest.

What many would argue is that some of the changes which occurred after this period were still of indigenous origin, and did not result from the arrival of the aliens. For example, the tremendous increase in China's population began in the Qing dynasty and has had a great impact upon Chinese society. This had absolutely nothing to do with Western imperialism and its only connection with the Manchus was that after they consolidated their rule they provided the stability which favoured population growth. Likewise, research has uncovered evidence of a cash economy, factories and a developing capitalism in the early Qing, as in Tokugawa Japan; again this is totally unrelated to any Western impact. Finally, in the nineteenth century the greatest threat to the Chinese government was not British guns or Russian soldiers, it was the Taiping Rebellion - a product of tensions and social unrest within China, though fuelled to a degree by Hong Xiuquan's own unorthodox brand of Christianity.

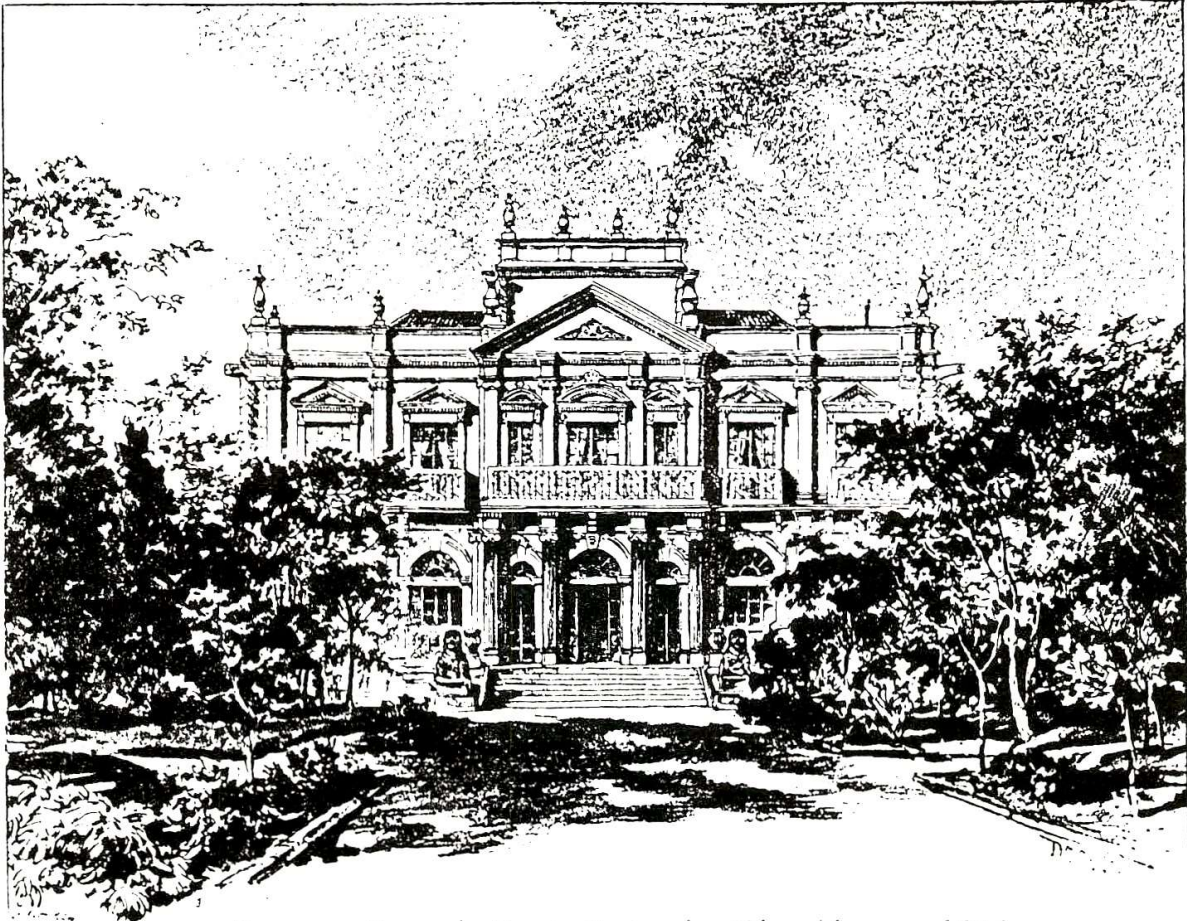
We must also consider how "alien" the Manchus were. Though they endeavoured to maintain a separate identity from the Han Chinese, most authorities consider them to have been largely Sinicized. In addition, they kept practically all Ming institutions intact. Hsu asserts that "while many Chinese joined the Manchu government and tacitly accepted the Qing rule, a great many more remained in silent opposition." (P. 8) This is questionable; it is impossible to ascertain the state of public opinion in China (or any place else) before the twentieth century. Hsu may have exaggerated the revolutionary sentiments among Chinese in the nineteenth century, just as many American historians have done with those of the American colonists in the eighteenth.

Professor Hsu's preoccupation with the foreign or alien impact on China is not unique. It is similar to the views of John King Fairbank (to whom this book is dedicated), who sees Modern Chinese history as a series of changes in response to the Western impact. Many Chinese historians have taken a similar view. The result is that many texts and monographs place too much emphasis on foreign relations and diplomatic history, and not enough on internal developments or changes, especially those not in direct response to foreign activities or ideologies. "The Rise of Modern China" is no exception - the majority of the chapters on the nineteenth century deal largely with foreign relations and the Chinese response, though Hsu claims he "avoids the pitfall of 'foreign causation'" and "the implication that China merely 'reacted'". (P. 13)



The reasons for this imbalance are worth considering. In the case of Western historians, one might say that it has been more convenient to study foreign relations - sources are usually available in English. Research into social and intellectual changes involves delving into voluminous Chinese materials - no easy task. There is also the Westerner's natural curiosity about Western activities and influence in China. The result, however, may be that we find ourselves knowing more about the British soldier Charles "Chinese" Gordon's activities in suppressing rebellion (colourful but not too significant) than those of the Chinese statesman Zuo Zongtang (crucial to the survival of the Qing dynasty).

Why Chinese historians, both in China and Taiwan, have chosen to concentrate on the foreign impact is a less easy question to answer. Some have been trained in the West and influenced by Western treatment of Chinese history. Another reason may be that the foreign impact on China beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century was sudden,



*Former French Consulate in Tianjin c.1860*



dramatic, and highly visible. Changes like the growth in population over the past 300 years occurred gradually and imperceptibly; nor were peasant rebellions, however large in scale, anything new. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Chinese intellectuals, historians, of course, among them became increasingly angry and frustrated over China's weakness in the face of foreign imperialism, some decried the destruction or decay of traditional Chinese institutions (e.g., the examination system). They began to look for a cause - the obvious answer was foreign imperialism in its many forms.

Let me make it clear that I do not condone imperialism or wish to belittle its significance in modern Chinese history. Indeed, one could argue that its impact is important simply because many Chinese have believed it to be important, and acted upon their beliefs. I simply wish to make readers aware that a balanced view of Chinese history must give due attention to all facets of development, not only those associated with imperialism and the Chinese reaction to it.

Professor Hsu also asks the question: when does Modern Chinese history begin? Does Modern China start with the Opium War (1839-1842) as Mao Zedong and Marxist historians have advocated? Or should we go back to the sixteenth century, when Western missionaries first made contact with China and the Ming was giving way to the Qing? Hsu sensibly resolves this question by stating that while the years after 1839 marked the beginning of major changes, one needs to consider the period before the Opium War if one is to attain a true understanding of the modern era. Note that Hsu does not entertain the notion of beginning in 1912 or 1949. The reason why much contemporary 'analysis' of modern China is silly is precisely because its authors are completely ignorant of China before the twentieth century.

Hsu's attempt at reconciling the two divergent views mentioned above is successful, yet it highlights an aspect of this work which may irritate some readers; that is, his efforts to accommodate a variety of views and interpretations may leave the reader at a loss to determine what Hsu's own opinion is. Hsu has good and bad things to say about missionaries, reformers, conservatives and radicals. Liberal historians (including this writer) are sometimes overly fond of locutions such as "on the other hand", "but we must also consider", "it is difficult to state conclusively"; often this search for the middle way (zhong yong) has obfuscation as its unintended result. However, I think most readers will applaud Hsu's even handed approach - it is preferable to that of the ideologue who attempts to indoctrinate.

Hsu goes on to identify several "shaping forces of Modern China". These are as broad as to be of little use in the study of Modern Chinese history. The first is "the government's policies and institutions". Hsu maintains "the overwhelming consideration of the dynasty was to maintain itself". This is not untrue, if rather obvious: history affords few examples of individuals or institutions who consciously sought their own destruction.

The second "shaping force" is the underground opposition to the government during the Qing dynasty - secret societies and revolutionaries, "the thread of nationalistic - revolutionary protest against foreign elements in Chinese life". (P. 9) This is an accurate depiction of the sentiments of Dr. Sun Yat-sen and his colleagues in the Tong Meng Hui, but one wonders how applicable it is to the secret societies, which after all existed before the Qing dynasty. They were certainly anti-Qing, but they engaged in illegal activities (many not political) and would have been opposed to any government. Also, any government at any time has opposition of one form or another; there is nothing peculiar to Modern China about this phenomenon.

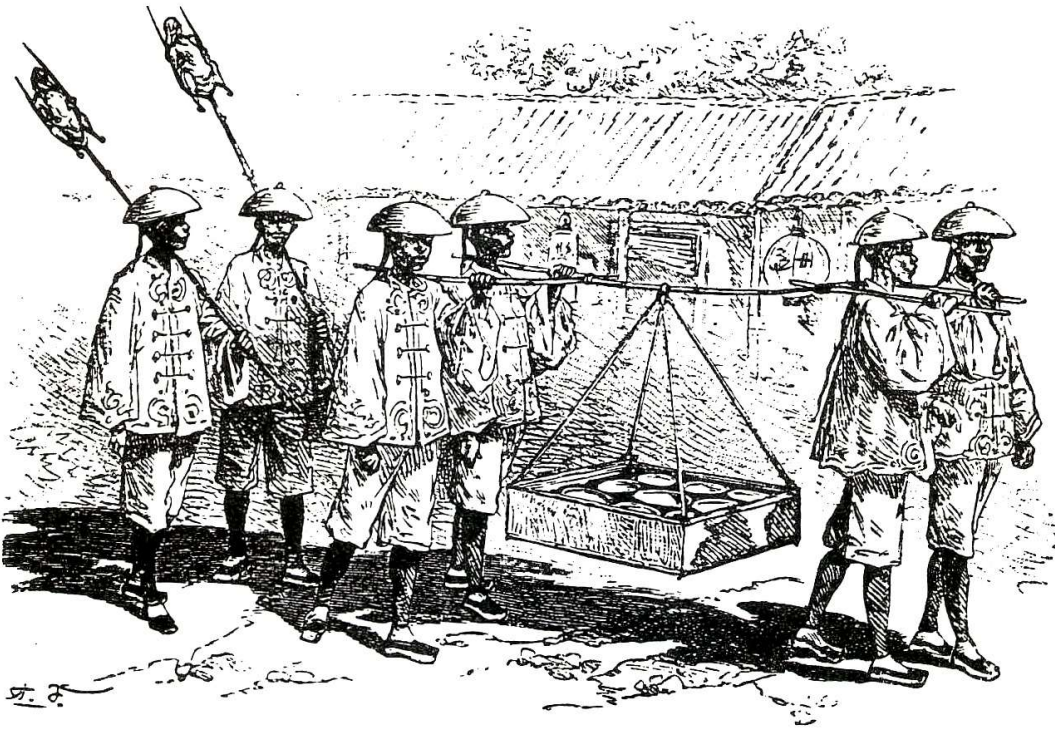
The third shaping force is "the search for a way of survival in a new world that had been forcibly thrust upon China". Again, this is so broad as to cover most government and intellectual activity in the modern era. It also implies that China's difficulties arose from its forced entry into the new world.

Similarly all encompassing are the other shaping forces Hsu mentions - the Nationalist - Communist struggle in the twentieth century and the transformation of the economy and society. The attempt at establishing a framework for Modern Chinese history is disappointing. This is not entirely Hsu's fault. The field of modern Chinese history is 'wide open'; so much remains to be done that we have trouble establishing exactly what happened during some periods (e.g. the Warlord era of the 1910's and 1920's) - thus analysis is very difficult. Hsu is hopeful that progress will continue to be made so that we can place Modern China in its proper historical perspective. By assembling and organizing all the material in The Rise of Modern China, Hsu has made no small contribution towards that goal.

### III

The main body of the text unfolds after this introduction. It begins, as noted earlier, with a thorough description of the Qing state,





society, and foreign relations before the Opium War.

The nineteenth century is treated in great detail with emphasis on foreign relations; though not at the expense of important domestic developments. One wishes that the author had given a bit more attention to social, economic and intellectual trends and a bit less to diplomatic and political history. Unless the reader is extremely interested in the step-by-step process of how the unequal treaties came about, he should read the passages devoted to these events selectively.

The chapters on the late Qing are distinguished by their thoroughness and accuracy. There is one error, however, which has persisted into the third edition. Hsu states that the agreement reached by Li Hongzhang and the Japanese statesman Ito Hirobumi over Korea in Tianjin was reached in 1884 (P. 337). The Li-Ito Convention was actually concluded in 1885.

The chapters on the Republican era (1912-1949) are less satisfactory. Several difficulties not of Hsu's making account for this. The Republican period has not been as extensively studied by historians as the late

Qing. Controversial issues abound, and these controversies interest governments as well as historians; and the former are often indisposed to allow historians to conduct independent analyses of the documents they possess. The era itself was one of chaos and disunity. The dust has not yet settled.

It is difficult for the historian to make a dispassionate analysis of an era he himself lived through. Hsu perhaps devotes a bit too much attention to the Guomindang and the Communists and neglects the many other groups active in China during this time.

## IV

Readers who obtain most of their information about China and its history through newspapers and journals (for example, Tripod) may be troubled by the romanization system used in this book. Hsu has elected to retain the Wade-Giles system in this third edition. Those who have accommodated themselves to the pinyin system will find no Deng Xiaoping but the old Teng Hsiao-p'ing instead. There is a conversion table at the back of the book, but constantly referring to it would be a cumbersome process.

Most linguists consider the pinyin system to be superior. The problem is that Chinese contains a number of sounds which have no equivalent in English. For example neither Cixi (Pinyin) nor Tz'u-hsi (Wade) comes close to the actual Chinese pronunciation of the Empress Dowager who was the "power behind the throne" in China for 50 years in the late Qing. Therefore no system of romanization can help those unfamiliar with Chinese phonetics to pronounce Chinese names and terms correctly.

It would have been a tremendous task to go through 900 pages of text and change every Chinese name and place from Wade-Giles to pinyin, yet one wishes Professor Hsu or Oxford University Press had made the effort. Pinyin is the romanization of the present and of the future. The retention of the Wade-Giles system renders The Rise of Modern China instantly obsolete in a very important way.

A desirable addition would be more Chinese characters. Chinese bibliographical entries are given in both romanization and characters and one wishes the author and the publishers had seen fit to provide the Chinese characters for every Chinese name and term (perhaps by inserting them in the index, as is done in The Cambridge History of China). This



would be of great help to those students of Chinese history who are also students of the Chinese language and to Chinese readers who often quite understandably find any romanization system impenetrable.

## V

The new material at the end of the book may be of the most interest to readers of Tripod. Well over one hundred pages are devoted to the years from 1976 to 1982. This is rather out of proportion to the space devoted to earlier periods and one wonders why Professor Hsu devoted so much time to what is obviously a perilous enterprise. Opinions that may seem sound and perceptive when formulated can in a few years appear silly and ill-founded. So far, Hsu has been fortunate. At this writing, all of the major trends which are described - pragmatic leadership under Deng Xiaoping, improved relations with the United States, emphasis on economic development, and the search for peaceful re-unification with Taiwan - have continued. Yet this attempt to write contemporary history is far from a total success.

First of all, one never knows what current event will turn out to have historical significance or affect future developments. History is not prophecy. For instance, will the Democratic party's recent nomination of Geraldine Ferraro for vice-president have a great impact on American political history and the participation of women in U.S. politics? We don't know; it could be that the Democratic ticket will go down to defeat in November and a woman will not be nominated to major office for the remainder of this century. Only time can tell.

Professor Hsu, it seems, has tried to get around this problem by including almost every bit of data available, thus the length of this section. The Rise of Modern China is nowhere short of detail: the author offers a sample of pidgin English (P. 152) and tells us what library Kang Youwei used to frequent while teaching in Guangzhou (P.363) - and often this attention to detail is both amusing and informative. However, Hsu outdoes himself in this final section. Statistics and minutiae abound. We are told that Deng Xiaoping attended a performance of the Harlem Globetrotters while in Washington, D.C. in January of 1979 (P. 822) and that Jiang Qing wore a black wig at her trial the next year (P. 863). Hsu is taking no chances - that basketball display and wig may turn out to be important some day.

Another flaw in this final section is the lack of dispassionate objectivity one expects of a professional historian. The first and

last sentences of this final section clearly illustrate the problem. "1976 was a year of agony for China. Deep bereavement was felt in every corner of the land over the loss of its three great leaders" (P. 775). "The genius of the Chinese people will find a way to make all China one again" (P. 899). Whether or not one agrees with these sentiments is not the point; they betray an emotional perspective out of place in a work of history.

Also troubling is Hsu's occasional reliance on less than authoritative sources to reinforce his own observations. Several times he cites reports which appeared in "The Central Daily News", a Taiwan newspaper and an organ of the Guomindang, which he does not identify as such. This can hardly be considered an unbiased source. He cites the opinion of Arthur Miller on the role of Mao Zedong in the Cultural Revolution (P. 790). While an accomplished dramatist, Miller cannot be seen as an authority on Chinese politics after a few weeks' visit.

Having said the above, I still feel this section has much to commend it. It is a clear, if lengthy, summary of the events in China's recent past. And Professor Hsu knows far more about China than many of today's observers who visit the country for a few weeks and return with weighty pronouncements. He possesses the knowledge and the experience to place contemporary China in historical perspective. Usually he achieves a balanced view: while certainly supportive of China's efforts to modernize, he doubts whether this can be achieved until 2030 (P. 856).

To conclude, this book is an invaluable reference to those interested in modern China. Not all readers will have the time to read it through, but they may use its extensive index to locate material of immediate interest to them. Those who have a great interest in Modern China, a good pair of eyes, and a strong will would do well to read through the entire book.