

From »the art of war« to »the force of war« Colonialism and the Chinese perception of war in transition

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Colonial wars and Chinese modern history

»Imperialism opened China's door by using its sturdy warships and strong artilleries.«¹ (帝國主義用船堅砲利打開了中國的大門) This expression can be found in many Chinese schoolbooks,² describing the starting point of China's modern history, which is paralyzed by the history of imperialist aggression in China. This narrative of China's defeat by the West not only defines the violent encounter with Western weaponry as the beginning of Chinese modern history, but also produces an explanation for the failure of China in the wars against foreign powers and the subsequent more than 100 years of »National Humiliation.«³ According to this, it was the Western »sturdy warships and strong artilleries' which

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- 1 A more common translation for this would be »advanced cannons and warships.« This is however a problematic translation. As I will argue in the second half of this article, temporal interpretations of the defeat in war emerged only much later, so that the translation into »advanced« is in fact anachronistic. Therefore, a direct translation is used here in order to leave out the temporal dimension in the English translation, which does not exist in the Chinese wording.
 - 2 For example, school history books: 人教版全日制普通高級中學教科書(必修)中國近代史現代史上冊, 人民教育出版社歷史室, 2003年。Or 普通高中課程標準實驗教科書(必修)。人民教育出版社。2007.
 - 3 It is called the »Hundred-year national humiliation« in official Chinese historiography, referring to the intervention and imperialism by foreign powers in China since the middle of the nineteenth century until the 1940s.

brought both the advent of modernity and the beginning of China's degrading from a sovereign to a semi-colonial country.

Indeed, Western military forces were the most striking feature of foreign powers to the Chinese officials who took part in the Opium Wars. Recent Chinese scholarship has proved that some Ming dynasty officials who had contacts with the Portuguese were already impressed by Western countries having strong war machinery. However, it was not until the time of the outbreak of the Opium War that the strength of Western weaponry was acknowledged and discussed in the imperial court (Huang 2010; Pang 2016). During the First Opium War (1839–1842), »sturdy warships and strong artilleries« (船堅砲利) became a popular term which was widely used and became semantically conventional in the imperial court (Pang 2016). According to Wang (1978), around the time of the First Opium War, there were at least 40 people connecting the Qing's failure in the war with the more powerful English weaponry in their official memorials and private writings.⁴ Despite a few differences in their understandings of the extent of the relevance, they all pointed out the fact that the Chinese weaponry was inferior to Western armaments. This impression was formed first in the circle of the Qing ruling class through their confrontation with the English in the war. It was then discussed and further spread to the broader Chinese population as a common explanation for the Qing's failure in protecting the country from losing its sovereignty against foreign powers. Thus, the lack of

4 This rough calculation is based on the period from Emperor Xianfeng and Emperor Daoguang's reign. It includes a wide range of people who either belonged to the leading class of the Qing dynasty, e.g., Emperor Daoguang himself, or state officials who directly confronted the questions of the war against foreign powers, e.g., advanced governmental officials such as Viceroys of Liangjiang Lukun (盧坤) and Yuqian (裕謙), Viceroy of Liangguang Lin Zexu (林則徐), or gentries and literati elites such as Bao Shichen (包世臣), Wei Yuan (魏源) and Li Bingkui (李炳奎).

powerful weaponry was seen as the most relevant aspect⁵ for the Qing's defeat in the war.

Seen from today, such discourses that the Qing's defeat by England was due to its undeveloped weaponry did not necessarily reflect the reality of war. Recent research has shown that Western war forces and weapons were not the sole reason for the victory of Western powers. As He Libo (2004) illustrates, after conducting a comparative study of the Chinese and the English war weapons being used at the time of the Opium War, the power of the English firearms did not surpass the Chinese fire bows by much. As a result, according to He, »the failure of the Qing dynasty was first the failure of institution, and then failure of technology« (He 2004). While pointing out that guns and bombs were invented in China, and that China also continued to innovate in gunpowder technology through the early eighteenth century, Andrade (2016) argues that the main reason of Qing's defeat was because its army was out of practice of fighting in wars, for Qing had enjoyed nearly a century of relative peace since 1760. From another perspective, but coming to a similar conclusion, Mao Haijian (2016) makes observations on different aspects of the constellation of the two sides of the war, from military equipment to military training and the transfer and distribution of the soldiers. He demonstrates that it was not difficult to come to the conclusion that the Qing government was about to lose in the war. However, the defeat of the Qing government was due to a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, in the nineteenth century, Chinese officials mainly used superior weaponry to explain Western abilities to impose their practices of informal (and sometimes formal) empire (Gallagher und Robinson 1953) on China. Hence, the most immediate consequences that they drew from the Opium War were related to weapon technology.

In this article, I will argue that the experience of war with Western colonial powers fundamentally changed the Chinese understanding of ways of waging war, creating an idea of war which was based on armaments and

5 The incompetence of the Qing statesmen was blamed as well. See e.g., Mao (2016).

technologies, rather than military strategy and tactics, because contemporary Chinese saw the Qing's defeat in war as a result of the lack of weaponry and weapon technology, rather than insufficient institutions. This led to the rise of a discourse on significant factors of waging war, focusing on the ability of using technological violence for defense and conquest, for which weapons (and much later efficient military command structure) constituted the main metaphor. Weapon technology that could guarantee a superior ability to exercise violence became the leading narrative on how to win a war and how to achieve sovereignty. Due to this, the aftermath of the Opium War saw a sudden rise of armaments purchased as means to »rescue the nation«⁶ in the late Qing period, and learning about Western weapon-building technology has become a fundamental driving force of Chinese reform efforts since then. The perception that the development of strong military forces, especially the possession of the *most* powerful war devices, was the only way of regaining and securing the integrity of Chinese territory and sovereignty started to gain more popularity among larger groups and has become a dynamic narrative ever since. In consequence, Western weapons have played a significant role in organizing the state machinery in China since the Opium Wars, and may still have an influence until today.

Yet at the time of the First Opium War, this was not understood as a motive for modernizing China in institutional, cultural, and other fields, but as a motive for purchasing weaponry and weapon-related technologies from other countries that had a stronger military force than China. The defeat in the war against foreign powers gave rise to a new desire, but it was, at first, not a desire for Western culture. It was a desire for powerful weapons which was not rooted in notions of »modernization,« but expressed as a difference in military strength between China and foreign countries. As for the aftermath of the First Opium War, it was a pragmatic and particularist discourse on the strength of an army that should not be confused with the universalist discourse on »progress in history« that

6 A series of movements in the late Qing period such as the Self-Strengthening Movement and the Hundred Days' Reform are generally also called »rescuing the nation movement« (救國運動).

today's historiography projects onto historical actors or the colonial powers used to justify their aggression. Even the most reform-minded Qing officials (and the Emperor Daoguang) did not yet use the temporalized narrative of »progress« and »modernization,« which dominates contemporary depictions of reform movements after the Opium War. In short: the way in which the Qing officials made sense of the Opium War prepared the ground for the desire to purchase Western weaponry, which was visible in China for a long time thereafter—but their discourse was nevertheless distinct from the discourse of »modernization« that was to structure many later reforms. They considered cannons, not »Western culture« or »modernity,« to be the force that could beat China and force it into the dependencies of an informal empire.

In depicting the Opium War as a turning point for the Chinese understanding of waging wars, I accentuate the cultural influence the colonial war experiences had on China, particularly on Chinese military culture. I argue that this change was caused by the pressure of the colonial powers, which was then established as a coherent historical narrative for Chinese modern history by Chinese authorities. It brought about the Chinese discourse on Western technology, particularly weaponry and war technology, as a representation of the modern »force of war.« This discourse replaced the former Chinese discourse, which believed in strategic doctrines as the most determinate means of waging wars, and which descended from the famous military strategist Sun Zi in his work »The art of war.« This Chinese admiration of weaponry further moved to other aspects of reforms and societal changes in China. It then built up the foundation for technocratic ideologies which could be seen regardless of the frequent regime changes in the years after. This frames the relations between China and foreign powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which the weapons trade played an essential role.

Having said that, I do not want to fall back to old patterns of description, where agency is attributed only to the West while China merely reacts to it. Newer works on global history have argued that, in spite of acknowledging the various forms of domination and oppression in the wake of colonialism, the agency of the colonized and the persistence of the

»traditional« ways of making sense of the world should not be overlooked (Conrad and Randeria 2002; Epple 2011; Randeria 2002; Werner and Zimmermann 2002). Indeed, Qing officials did actively make sense of the Opium Wars within their own framework of thought and in their own intellectual debates. Nevertheless, the violence of war and the asymmetries of the informed empire were also real. Furthermore, by paying attention to the change in the understanding of war in China, this article reveals that the agency between China and foreign powers was not equal. The two Opium Wars (and the following colonial wars between foreign powers and China) took place in the context of a colonial world order and were started by colonial powers, which used this context to establish practices of an informal (sometimes formal) empire in China. Contemporary Chinese were forced to react to and cope with these events, however much of their reaction might be actively negotiated in Chinese discourses.

The transition in the understanding of war

When the First Opium War shook the ruling class of the Qing dynasty from its dreams of »the Middle Kingdom,« it also induced dramatic changes to the official discourse, adding a new but crucial theme as a decisive factor for the fate of the country: the theme of strong weaponry. While other changes in Chinese society took place gradually and in varying degrees with the deepening of foreign colonialization in China, the conceptual change in war took place first and remained dynamic and of central importance in the course of Chinese modern history. When talking about Western influences on China, most scholars stress cultural imaginaries such as nation-state and democracy, modern disciplines such as mechanical engineering and natural science, or ideologies such as capitalism and communism. However, as William Kirby (1997) puts it, »Western militarism (in Soviet, German and American national forms) was undoubtedly the single most successful cultural export from the West to China« (Waldron 1991, 2002). The Chinese version of militarism that emerged from this was marked with the belief in Western machineries, particularly in Western weaponry—in combination with the power of extensive industrialization of the entire country.

The new significance of weaponry in official discourse constituted a major shift in the way Qing scholar officials argued publicly. Chinese culture certainly cannot be conceptualized as a monolithic, not to say static, tradition. Like cultures in general, it was constantly changed, contested, and re-invented through readings of texts from the past. Furthermore, as a highly multi-cultural and multi-ethnic country, Qing China would not be seen as a homogeneous »culture«⁷ by the time of the Opium Wars. However, without claiming that there ever was »a Chinese tradition,« one can nevertheless see that the discourses of Qing officials revolved around certain sets of assumptions about the world. This included certain legitimate ways to speak about war, which were dominant in Qing officials' discourse around the time of the First Opium War. These discourses on war as an »art« largely displaced violence and played down the relevance of weaponry. They described their own tradition—the same tradition which had invented gunpowder and bombs and had conquered vast territories—as a peaceful, intellectual civilization striving for balance and harmony. For example, Sun Zi's »The art of war,« the oldest Chinese military book, written in the fifth century BC and the fundamental work for Chinese military thought, underlines ethics and human factors in war, promotes »non-attack« and »righteousness in war,« emphasizes war strategies, and advocates asymmetric capabilities for the weak to defeat the strong. However, this does not mean that the Chinese dynasties have always been pacific and wars were seen as a kind of beautiful art. Nor does it reflect the reality of Qing dynasty: even though scholars studying Asian international relations have pointed out »that East Asia's pre-Western history generally seems less violent and its wars less epochal than early modern Europe's,«⁸ wars on its northern and western borders were nevertheless much more frequent and by no means non-violent

7 For arguments why this hybrid and shifting culture should still be seen as »China,« see: Wang (2014), and Jian (2016, 30–43).

8 For further literature on this topic, see Chanda (2006), Kang (2012), and Tang (2010).

(Kelly 2011). As Li (2017)⁹ and Perdue (2005) have argued, Ming and Qing rulers were keen to import or develop new strategies to win their frontier wars. Similarly, as scholars of the New Qing History have demonstrated, until the beginning of the nineteenth century, »an intense focus on military affairs was one of the Qing state’s most distinctive characteristics« (Waley-Cohen 2006). However, in their understanding of war, weapons did not play such a central symbolic role, and violence would not be at the center of attention in waging war. In contrast to many European Enlightenment philosophers, they did not produce a discourse on Realpolitik which would focus on violence as a means for political ends. But however idealistic and counterfactual this discourse was, and however contested and fluid its assumptions were in the years before 1840—the way of writing about war was nevertheless fundamentally different from the discourse that would emerge after the Opium War.

Even in the beginning of the First Opium War, the Qing Emperor and officials in the imperial court were actually very confident in their war strategies which they believed to be the most significant factor for waging a war. However, after the first confrontation with the English military, worries concerning their weaponry started to spread. They believed they were nevertheless still able to succeed against the Westerners by using strategies. In the nineteenth year of Emperor Daoguang’s (道光) reign (1839), Lin Zexu, the Viceroy of Liangjiang, asserted that even though

9 In this book Li discussed the major characteristics in the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, which are firearms, representing a new kind of violence and the purchase of business interests. In this period, Qing rulers did pay attention to weapons. They were even the best equipped in East Asia at that time. However, as in his talk about »Technology and the destiny of the nation—different results of two Chinese-European wars« (技術與國運—中歐兩次戰爭的不同結局, last accessed February 26, 2017, http://www.bjd.com.cn/sy/llzk/201702/20/t20170220_11052971.html), Li explained, with the heritage of the Ming dynasty, that the Qing dynasty did not have enemies in East Asia for a long time, and this is why Qing rulers were not interested in improving their weapons. As a result, China won the war against the Netherlands (1661–1668) and lost the war against the British (1940–1942) due to the strength of their weapons.

the English have »sturdy warships and strong artilleries«, these are a disadvantage when they move onto the land (The First Historical Archives of China 1999). Emperor Daoguang adopted this view from Lin and wrote in his edict one year later: »These foreigners barely rely on their sturdy warships and strong artilleries. However, the moment they get on the land, they will lack skills« (清宣宗实录). As a result, various endeavors, particularly war strategies such as »huo gong«¹⁰ (火攻) and »jianbi qingye«¹¹ (坚壁清野) (The First Historical Archives of China 1987) had been suggested by Qing officials against the advanced English weaponry. As the war went on with more defeats for the Chinese, some Qing officials gained a more concrete understanding of the limits of war strategies against Western weaponry. They started to consider adopting Western weaponry. One of them was Yu Qian (裕谦), the viceroy of Liangjiang. He claimed in his report to the Daoguang Emperor that it was of great importance to build ships following the Western methods if the Qing dynasty wanted to have peace for long (The First Historical Archives of China 1987). Similarly, but emphasizing the weaponry aspect, Yi Shan (奕山), the Jingni General, advocated that the cannons should be built according to Western methods. At the end of the First Opium War, many observations of the war were made by Qing officials, and Western weaponry became more and more a significant factor equivalent to the art of war. For example, Lin Zexu (林则徐) who witnessed the war, wrote about his experiences in the war: »Their cannons can function for a distance of ten Chinese miles, but ours can't do that. Our cannons cannot reach them, but theirs can reach us first, this is because our machines are not good enough. Their cannons fire like our rows of guns, which make continuous noises. Our cannons fire one time and then again after a while. This is because we are not skilled. [...] To summarize, the English are not much better than we are, except for their good weapons and

10 War strategy: fire attack.

11 War strategy: scorched earth.

military training« (Lin 2002; *Opium War I*, 567).¹² This all shows that during the war, Western weaponry was first considered to be less important than the *art* of waging war, but was later considered equally important.

In consequence, some Qing officials also started to develop a strong interest in weapon technology. They showed their interests in Western weapons (Fei and Liu 1985) by introducing Western military technologies and arms, to name just a few works written in the course of the 1940s: Zheng Fuguang's »Illustration of Steamboats« (鄭復光: 《火輪船圖說》), Wang Shenyang's »Building A Cannon« (江伸洋: 《鑄炮說·附台炮》), Ding Gongchen's »Illustration of Cannon Practicing« (丁拱辰: 《演炮圖說》), and Chen Jieping's »Imitation of Western Gunpowder Production« (陳階平的《請仿西洋製造火藥疏》). This was obviously an unusual phenomenon because in the first 150 years of Qing rule, not a single military book specialized in firearms was ever published (Huang 2004). All these books were evoked by the belief that Chinese warcraft was inferior to Western warcraft, which caused the defeat in the war, which could then be made up by introducing more powerful armaments from the West (Hu 2015). Because these officials believed that weapons were the reason for British victory in the Opium War, they also believed that they needed Western weaponry in order to defend against foreign as well as domestic forces. Western weaponry was desired as a means to break free from the bonds of colonialism and the informal empire imposed on China by colonial powers.

Moreover, domestic power struggles caused by the war also reinforced the Qing officials' understanding of the importance of Western weaponry. The Qing military needed Western weapons to fight against the rebels of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, who themselves also purchased Western weapons. This, again, was an outgrowth of the defeat in the Opium War. After the war, the Qing government had to pay the reparations for the war according to the unequal treaties. This greatly intensified the poverty

12 Original text: »彼之大砲遠及十里內外，若我砲不能及彼，彼砲先已及我，是器不良也。彼之放砲如內地之放排槍，連聲不斷。我放一砲後，須輒轉移時，再放一砲，是技不熟也。求其良且熟焉，亦無他深巧耳。«

of the Qing population because of the tax increases. Besides, the disruption of shipping patterns as a result of Qing's defeat in war left many people out of work. Under these circumstances, a state oppositional to Qing, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, was established by Hong Xiuquan (洪秀全) and others in 1861, claiming to overthrow the Qing dynasty, which was too weak to defend its population from Western powers. Hence, Taiping leaders started to buy Western weapons as a consequence of colonial influences. They were able to buy Western weaponry due to the enforced opening of Chinese markets and the interest of Western powers in the weapon trade with various power groups. As a witness of the Opium War in Guangzhou, Hong Xiuquan referred to the unequal treaties as an extreme humiliation. Although the claims of the rebels were anti-colonial and directed against »foreign demons,« Western arms were seen as crucial for achieving their goal of liberating China. Taiping rebels—most of whom were peasants—were among the forerunners who used Western weaponry extensively against the Qing authority and foreign powers during their rebellion from 1851 to 1864 (Su 1998; Wang 1954; Wang 2007). Again, Qing officials interpreted the strengths of the Taiping rebellion as a consequence of Western armament. Zeng Guoquan (曾國荃), the Qing official sent to quell the rebellion, made the following comments on the war against the Taiping army: »Their firearms are a hundred times better than ours, [...] in the past when we had wars against rebellions, there were never foreign armaments. In recent years, there is not a single rebel not equipped with foreign weapons.« (Guo 1935)¹³ Zeng Guofan (曾國藩), another important Qing official, also concluded that the rapid success of the Taiping Rebellion was »in fact the force of Western arms« (Zeng and Li 2012).¹⁴ This was an impulse for the further implementation of Western armaments by the Qing authority. As a result, both the Qing army and rebels competed to equip themselves with Western armaments in wars against each other. It is apparent from this that the

13 Original text: »賊之火器精利於我百倍之多，又無日不以開花大砲打壘年，洋槍隊多至兩萬桿。«

14 Original text: »實賴洋砲之力。« (May 8, 1854)

Opium War had not only resulted in the reform-minded Qing ruling class's desire for Western armaments for self-defense, but also in its domestic enemies, who were subject to them, believing that the possession of Western arms was a fundamental factor for waging wars and (re-)gaining sovereignty.

The eminent importance of weaponry in reform movements is most clear when looking at the Self-Strengthening Movement (自強運動), also Yangwu Movement (洋務運動) in Chinese, which means Westernization movement. This movement was not a coherent movement, but a set of different attempts made by reform-minded Qing statesmen between 1861 and 1895. But the various, often at best loosely connected officials and their different ideas of reform shared the common notion of strengthening China in order to defend its sovereignty from foreign powers. And they did so primarily by buying Western weaponry. This can be exemplified by looking at individual people who were active in this movement. Although the majority of the ruling class in the Qing dynasty still subscribed to a conservative Confucian worldview and insisted that learning from the West was absurd, the imperial prince and important Manchu statesman Gong and Han state officials such as Zeng Guofan (曾國藩) and Li Hongzhang (李鴻章) believed that it was necessary to adopt Western military technology and weaponry to strengthen China. Li, for example, had contact not only with foreigners, but also had a group of employees who had studied abroad and were highly impressed by Western military forces. Li believed that Chinese systems were all better than the Western ones, claiming that it was only Western military force which China could not surpass (Zhang, Yong 2005). His primary objective was to preserve the traditional Chinese culture and institutional system as the basis, and to optionally adopt Western technologies, particularly in the military sphere. Accordingly, building Western standardized shipyards and arsenals as well as training Chinese soldiers with the help of Western advisers were considered as the most important arrangements of the movement. Beiyang Fleet, Hanyang Arsenal, Jiangnan Machine Central Factory, for instance, were important achievements made at this

time under the supervision of Western countries such as England, France, Germany, and the USA.

The end of the First Opium War was the beginning of a series of colonial wars between China and many foreign powers. The signature of the Treaty of Nanking, the first unequal treaty in modern Chinese history, was also merely a precedent for even more unequal treaties. The voice for reforms became stronger with the unfolding of and the defeat in each war. The change in the understanding of how to wage war from emphasizing the strategy to the force in the time after the Opium War can be observed by looking at the reform efforts made by different groups of reform-minded Chinese in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, in which stronger armaments were seen as the most essential element for overcoming foreign oppression. From the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861–1895) to the Hundred Days' Reform (1898) in the late Qing period, from the arms race of the warlords during the Warlord Era (1916–1928) to the militarization in the Republic of China (1928–1945), along with frequent changes of political powers, Chinese modern history has experienced a great number of movements, reforms, and revolutions. Hardly was one reform completely declared a failure when another wave of reform ideas arose. It is true that the major goals of these reforms differed from each other, from admiring Western machinery and technology to undertaking institutional and ideological reforms according to Western models. But to whatever extent the reformers disagreed with each other, they all agreed on the idea that China had to possess Western weapons. The importance of the art of waging war, however, faded out of the Chinese discourse.

From Westernization to modernization

All of this shows that a shift in discourse happened in the 1840s, and that this shift was intrinsically bound to foreign colonialism in China in this period. It was, however, not so much the colonial discourse that influenced the thinking and writing of contemporary Chinese, but rather the colonial war—the experience of being defeated by a foreign power, that Qing officials had to make sense of within their own discourse and

according to their own terms. There is a wide range of literature on Chinese adoption of Western colonial discourse on history and progress.¹⁵ However, the new discourse on weapons is not such a case. The idea of »modernity« was largely absent from the debate on weapons because its ideas were not translated from colonial discourse, but developed by Chinese officials in order to interpret their experiences of defeat. Unlike other perceptual changes, this change in the perception of war was not an outcome of slow discursive shifts or knowledge exchanges with Western countries or Japan. Instead, it was a shift caused by an »unusual« war experience that Qing officials had to make sense of. Two observations can be pointed out here: firstly, the change took place in the circle of witnesses of war and it was too abrupt to be considered a gradual process of absorbing Western colonial discourses. As is shown, even during the war, some Qing officials started to talk about the power of Western weaponry. In the aftermath of the war, the possession of Western armaments became the main reference of military strength. War stratagems, however, accordingly became a subordinate element in the Chinese discourses on war. Secondly, this change happened in different social classes at the same time: not only the statesmen from Qing government who were marked as the reform-minded elites, but also the Taiping Rebels in the 1860s, the majority of whom were peasants and other low-ranked members of society, committed themselves to the new understanding of war, in which powerful armaments were considered to be the decisive element of winning in war. This happened too fast to be explained as a trickle-down process of new ideas from Westernized elites to the peasantry. In short: after the first experiences of war with the Western power, people in the late Qing period from varying social classes started to argue for the urgency of having Western armaments in order to secure sovereignty or to rescue China. This, therefore, was not an adoption to colonial discourse, but an interpretation created within the Chinese discourse, attempting to make sense of the encounter with the military force of colonial empires.

15 See, for example, Marius Meinhof's contribution (2017) in this special issue.

The colonial idea of civilization and modernization did not play a central role in these attempts at sense-making. Instead, contemporary Chinese interpreted the Opium War as an encounter between forces from different regions of the world that differed in strength at the time. This means that the Qing's defeat in colonial wars was not seen as a temporal difference between Western modernity and Chinese backwardness in the first place. Overall, the different positions of England and China, as well as the reform attempts within China, were interpreted according to geographical metaphors, and not by the temporal metaphors that the colonial empires used. In consequence, the reforms in military spheres, particularly in the fields of weapons, were depicted as »Westernization« (西化) in the first place, before a colonial discourse on temporal differences between China and the West took place.

This had mainly two consequences: firstly, the Qing's defeat in the Opium War as well as subsequent defeats during the nineteenth century were not considered proof of an overall backwardness of Chinese civilization. Rather, they were considered proof of the urgency to »borrow« powerful weaponry, and maybe even to learn some skills to use this weaponry, from the geographical West. Secondly, even for the most reform-minded Qing statesmen and elites of the nineteenth century, not all spheres of the Chinese society were to be reformed. Chinese reforms started with the aim of »Westernization« of some spheres, particularly the military sphere. Accordingly, the desire for Western weaponry was not fueled by an admiration of the West, nor did it contain a desire to emulate Western culture. The »West« depicted in this discourse was not the »hyperreal Europe« described by Chakrabarty (1992), but rather a description of the geographical location of countries which had stronger weaponry. Accordingly, China was not seen as a place »backward« in relation to this geographical West. In consequence, the strengthening of China was restrained in the military sphere. Throughout the various different positions that different officials had on Western weaponry and military reforms, the idea of a holistic »Chinese culture« that might be »unmodern« in its entirety remained unfamiliar to them. Such an idea, which Hu Shi (Hu 2001) called »a wholehearted modernization,« proclaiming an attitude

of learning modernity from Western culture, was articulated only much later, after the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the falling apart of political power in China, when the exclusive »Westernization« of the weaponry proved unsuccessful in »rescuing the nation« (Luo 2008).

It is impossible here to give an extensive account on the question how the discourse on a »Westernization« of the weapons/military would shift to and be implemented in discourses of modernity and modernization. One important factor here certainly was China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894), which buried the hopes of the Self-Strengthening Movement and in the meanwhile pushed the reforms further to an institutional layer. As Li Hongzhang, perhaps the most pioneering representative of the Self-Strengthening Movement, summarized after the Qing's defeat by the Japanese: »What I have done in all my life, the military training, the [strengthening of] the navy, they are all tigers made of paper [...]« (Wu and Liu 2008). The full concentration on the military sphere did not lead to freedom from foreign powers. As a result, new reform attempts were made to »rescue the nation.«

After the defeat in the Sino-Japanese war, the reform-minded Emperor Guangxu undertook the Hundred Days' Reform (1898) with the help of his supporters. This reform concerned many aspects, involving institutional and ideological changes as well as the intention of a complete change to the military buildup. Yet the reform only lasted about 100 days. With the help of other oppositional forces, the Empress Dowager Cixi forced the Emperor Guangxu into seclusion and Cixi herself took over the control of the Qing court. After the Hundred Days' Reform was aborted, major supporters of the reform went into exile. For example, Liang Qichao, one of the most influential contemporary intellectuals, fled to Japan. There he had access to a wide range of Japanese translations of Western literature, particularly those dealing with the questions of »modernity,« which would greatly influence his writings and make him import various concepts—including the very word »modern« (現代)—into the Chinese discourse (Gao 2016; Luo 2009; Zhang, Haipeng 2005). It was also at this time that Western social Darwinist and historicist writings were translated and introduced to China by Chinese elites. From many first-

hand translations of Western colonial scholarship, a highly elaborated narrative explaining of why Westerners would constantly win wars and be able to subdue other civilizations was generated in China. But even in this era of increasing interests in the West, the term »modernization« itself was not adopted by a broader circle of intellectuals until the 1930s, when the special issue »Questions on China's Modernization« (中國現代化問題號) of »Shen Bao Yue Kan« (申報月刊)¹⁶ was published. This special issue¹⁷ published 26 collected articles by highly influential contemporary Chinese intellectuals in which the word »modernization« was used 347 times—the highest frequency and concentration ever (Wang 2012). However, military reforms and comprehensive industrialization remained of central importance.

Conclusion: Scars of war¹⁸

In this article I have argued that the defeat in the Opium War and the way in which China was »degraded« from a sovereign to a (semi-)colonized country changed the Chinese understanding of waging war. This, in turn, kicked off reforms and movements which aimed at improving the weaponry according to Western standards. I explained that this change was rooted in colonial acts on the one hand, and on the other it was an active form of making sense of the colonial war by concerned Qing officials. This belief in the necessity of possessing strong weaponry was deeply engraved in the hearts of contemporary Chinese intellectuals in

16 Published from 1932 by Shen Bao Publisher, which was the most influential newspaper at its time. Shen Bao Yue Kan had close ties to the most famous contemporary Chinese intellectuals such as Lu Xun, Ba Jin, and Zhu Kezhen. This enabled Shen Bao Yue Kan to be the most influential journal in the 1930s in China.

17 Special issue of July 1938.

18 This title is inspired by the book title *Scars of War: The Impact of War on Modern China* by Diana Lary and Stefen MacKinnon. It has little to do with the content of the book because the book concentrates on the impact of the Second World War on China, especially the impact of the Japanese denial of the Nanjing Massacre and the refusal to apologize to the Chinese victims.

order to »rescue the nation« since the middle of the nineteenth century. As a matter of fact, strengthening China's military force was constantly at the center of reforms in China since the first defeat in colonial wars. Even when the reform measures sometimes did not solely emphasize weaponry, one of the ultimate goals—if not the ultimate one—of these reforms was always to change the state machinery into one that could facilitate a war in a Western sense. Together with the development of nationalism in China, this became the most important concern of the Chinese authorities. Countless big names can be listed for their contributions to discourses, efforts, and achievements regarding China's military reform. For them, waging a war was no longer mastering the better art of war, but rather possessing the more powerful weapon. In other words, the essential factor of winning a war, for them, changed from strategy to objects (weapons). This technocratic notion of war remained a powerful imaginary in the course of Chinese modern history.

Colonialism was central for this change because it was China's defeat in colonial wars against foreign powers and the subsequent establishment of an informal empire in China which evoked the thinking that war machinery and military technology are not only essential to the development of the nation and to national self-determination, but also to the existence of the nation. The efforts to reform China's military by buying and building weaponry shows that weaponry was seen as crucial not only to win wars against foreign powers, but also, in consequence, for »liberating« China. Weapons would become the guarantee for national self-determination and the basic notion of war to be something won by the force of weaponry, rather than by war strategy. Thus, even though the discourse on weapons was increasingly embedded in the overall discourse of civilization, modernity, and national sovereignty, the central experience of colonial war and the importance of powerful weapons remained central concerns for the Republic of China as well as for the Communist Party. The desire for »Western« weaponry—largely understood as »modern« weaponry since the twentieth century—continued to shape the relations of the Chinese Government to Western/foreign countries.

This desire for Western weaponry created a predicament: Western weaponry was purchased by Chinese authorities to wage wars, and ultimately to reconquer Chinese sovereignty. However, buying Western weapons made these groups, despite their anti-colonial alignment, dependent on Western weapon traders. This change in the understanding of the war, which then led to an admiration of technology and modernity, already contained elements that would prepare a later adoption of colonial discourses on Chinese backwardness. The intended military modernization was not enough to liberate China. The foreign powers' colonial activities and imperial aggressions in China were not held back because the progress of arsenal-building or the setting up of an industry in China from scratch could not fulfill the mission of »rescuing« the nation from being colonized. Embedding the desire for strong weapons into a discourse of »modernity« even deepened these asymmetries: the more the notion of differences in strength between regions became a notion of differences in modernity between more or less advanced nations, the more could weakness in war and economic dependency be disguised, legitimized, and used as a reason for a more cultural subjection (Zhang 2006).¹⁹

Furthermore, in contrast to the colonial discourse that was translated and adopted in China, the new understanding of war was brought to the Chinese through the experience of colonial war. It thus constitutes a logic which is slightly different from the notion of a rather »symmetric« self-colonization, which seems dominant in contemporary discourse on (semi-) colonial China. Cultural studies of the reception of Western ideas in the era of the May Fourth Movement has created many important insights, but its focus on literature and philosophy sometimes resulted in the impression that semi-colonial China was mainly interested in Western intellectual achievements. This mirrors, however, more the research

19 This problem was also criticized by a few contemporary Chinese intellectuals such as Zhang Naiqi (章乃器). Zhang called this excessive admiration for Western weaponry »overstress on weapon theory« and this way of looking at history a historical view of »overstress on weaponry.« He demonstrates that weaponry is not the only most significant element for winning wars.

focus of the disciplines studying this specific timeframe than the interests of Chinese elites after the Opium War. First and foremost, long before the notion of »modernity« became persuasive for so many Chinese, colonial wars created a desire for Western weapon technology, which was born from experiences of defeat. This was not seen as »advanced« weaponry from a temporally »modern« civilization, but as »strong« weapons from a geographical »West.« For state officials, it was technology rather than literature, Mr. Weaponry rather than Mr. Democracy, that triggered the deepest desires for reforms. In the ideology of war we find a much more violent, more obviously asymmetric form of entanglement, and therefore something much closer to the classical notions of »colonialism.« A general notion of a need for war technology, as well as the specific form of making sense of the defeat in the Opium War, remained powerful in Chinese discourse until today. As is stressed in history books in Chinese schools today: »Imperialism opened China's door by using its sturdy warships and strong artilleries.«²⁰

20 See footnote 3.

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