From "Tian-Xia" 天下 1) to the World
—Wei Yuan's Ideal and Strategy

Qian Guohong

I

After the mid-nineteenth century, as the Western colonialist powers encroached upon the Orient, China was in danger of national subjugation. In their efforts to save the nation, contemporary Chinese intellectuals began to disseminate Western astronomy, geography, history, and other learning of humanities. Through comparative studies of the Oriental and Western civilizations, their conception of the Orient-West civilizations and value systems took shape, on the basis of which they set forth their schemes for national salvation. These schemes may be called China's earliest modernization blueprint drawn by the Chinese intellectuals in early modern Chinese history.

In view of the historical course of modern China, past studies tend to stress analysis of the superficial phenomena while neglecting the underlying causes; too much emphasis is laid upon the resistance of Chinese civilization against Western civilization, while the positive effects of Chinese intellectual's subjective judgment and deep consciousness are often not duly dealt with.

In recent years, great strides have been made in the comparative study of the respective modernization processes of China and other countries. Yet the field still leaves much to be concerned with. Many people believe that so-called modernization is actually a process in which the backward and tradition-laden Oriental nations emulate the more advanced Western nations. In other words, the West-East relationship is a challenge-response relation. Is this simplistic evolutionist conception of history, with its fountainhead in the West, consistent with historical reality? Reviewing the past hundred and odd years, we can see that the Eastern nations did not simply meet the challenge from the West passively,
nor did they simply evolve from a state of backwardness toward modernity. In fact, the modernization of the Eastern nations is a process of interaction and reconciliation of the two civilizations, which is intriguing, risky, and exciting. In this process there emerged a large number of individuals who had high ideals and were bold in exploration. As far as China is concerned, from Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794-1856)'s opening eyes to the world, to the "Westernization" advocates' efforts to probe the mystery of Western industrial civilization, from Sun Yet-sen(1866-1925)'s nationalist revolution, to Mao Ze-dong (1893-1976)'s socialist revolution, all embodied the invaluable practice of seeking dialogue and integration of the two civilizations.

The other nations in East Asia shared similar experiences. Take Japan, a neighboring country separated from China by only a narrow stretch of sea, for instance. Ever since their first contact with Western learning in the early eighteenth century, Japanese intellectuals had striven zealously to probe into the Western world and absorb the best of Western civilization. By the end of the nineteenth century, the West was no longer an alien land to the Japanese in its literal sense, but had become the cultural and ideological homeland of a regenerated Japan. All-out identification with Western culture becomes one chief feature of modern Japanese culture. In their 100-odd-year modern history, the Japanese were not free of mistakes of various kinds, yet their enthusiasm in absorbing Western civilization never abated. Thus it can be seen that the influence of Western civilization in Japan's modernization strife was tremendous indeed.

Of course, in their interaction with Western civilization, the paths China and Japan took respectively for modernization were different. Many factors account for the different courses of these two countries. The international situations that each country found itself in, the domestic political and economic conditions of the late Qing Dynasty and the Tokugawa shogunate, the ideological structure of the intellectuals in each society, were quite distinct from each other. Due to the limitation of space, these respects will not be elaborated here. This essay intends to concentrate on analyzing the thought of Wei Yuan, an influential figure in literary circles around the mid-nineteenth century, with an eye to explore
the Chinese intellectuals' ideological structure and conception of Chinese and Western Civilizations in China's early modern history.

II

( I )
The tumultuous time laded us with a myriad of thoughts,
Upon our meeting we found ourselves at a loss for word.
Shame on the loopers cowardly curling up amid the tempest 
The dragon-slaughters turned themselves into a laughingstock 
Mugwort ought to be aged three years before moxibustion 
Borders must be guarded north and south to defend our nation.
I am going in a bamboo raft up to the Milky Way,
To explore the overseas in search of state strategy.

( II )
Our meeting and departing took place over a single night,
How much sadness and joy intermingled in my heart!
Lying in beds facing each other, we talked and listened
To the raindrops overturning the duckweed on the pond.
Banished are you yet crafty sycophants throng in power,
The state's slackening of vigilance fills us with anxiety.
Alas! Don't spend the moonlit night at Jingkou in Vain,
Let the bosom friends wash out their grief with wine.

In June 1840, as a result of China's defeat in the Opium War, the patriotic scholar-official Lin Ze-xu 林則徐 (1785-1850) was degraded and banished to Xinjiang 新疆. When he was passing Jingkou 京口 (the old name of Zhenjiang 鎮江), Wei Yuan came specially from YangZhou 揚州 to meet him. The two poems above in the title of "Jiangkou wu Lin Shao-mu zhifu" (Meeting Governor-General Lin Shao-mu at Jingkou) present a vivid account of their meeting. Within the limited space, Wei Yuan depicted the friendship between them and expressed his worries over the situation and his hatred for the capitulationists. The two patriotic scholar-officials talked freely and it was agreed that Wei Yuan was to compile a book entitled The Haiguo Tuzhi 海國圖志 (Illustrated Records of the Maritime
"I am going in a bamboo raft up to the Milky Way / To explore the overseas in search of state strategy." These two lines reflect Wei Yuan's strong desire to know about the overseas situation.

Both Wei Yuan and Lin Ze-xu were eminent thinkers active in the late Qing political arena. Both were representatives of the earliest people who opened their eyes to the world. They witnessed the historical transition and their thinking was formulated in the course of reflection on the time they lived in, and therefore it has great historical significance.

Living up to Lin Ze-xu's expectation, Wei Yuan published successively in 1842 two books: The Shengwu Ji 賽武功記 (Records of Imperial Military Achievements) and The Haiguo Tuzhi. The two books were results of great mental efforts and they reflect the great transformation in Wei Yuan's thinking after the Opium War.

It is well known that Wei Yuan in these two books advanced his celebrated idea of "learning from the superior foreign technology to restrain the foreigners (師夷之長技以制夷)." There have been many interpretations on what the epigram means literally, which will not be discussed here. Herewith we will strive to detect Wei Yuan's real intention in stating the thesis through an analysis of its connotative meaning.

Literally, the thesis has at least three levels of meaning, consisting respectively of the core phrases — "Learning from the foreigners," superior technology" and "to restrain the foreigner." The interrelationship among these three levels is as follows: first, the premise of the thesis is to admit the existence of the "superior foreign technology," on basis of which Wei Yuan called for "learning from the foreigners," that is, learning from the strong points of the West.

But learning from the foreigners is not an end in itself, the ultimate objective is to "restrain the foreigners," that is, to eventually surpass and prevail over the West. Wei Yuan's illustration is indicative of the basic attitude of the Chinese intellectuals in early modern history toward foreign cultures. Such a theme runs through Wei Yuan's foreign culture conception as was reflected in both The Shengwu Ji and The Haiguo Tuzhi.

In his The Shengwu Ji, after reference to the superiority of Western weaponry, "their gunboats are sturdy and artillery fire fierce," Wei Yuan
called on his contemporaries to "fend off Western aggressors by utilizing the same technology that they rely on," and to "assault the foreign aggressors with the foreign weaponry and technology". In his *The Daoguang Yangsou Zhengfu Ji* (Records or War and Negotiations with the Foreign Fleet in the Reign of Emperor Daoguang), he defined "learning from the foreigners" as: "absorb exhaustively the strong points of foreign countries, and adopt their superior technology to serve the needs of China". His strategy of learning from the West was beginning to take shape. But he did not advance the idea of "learning from the superior foreign technology to restrain the foreigners" as a wholesome theory until the publication of *The Haiguo Tuzhi*. From *The Shengwu Ji* to *The Haiguo Tuzhi*, Wei Yuan's strategic thinking toward foreign culture evolved from formulation to deepening. In the following paragraphs, we will strive to grasp the specific implications of Wei Yuan's thesis through analyzing the evolution process of his thought.

The following is taken from *The Shengwu Ji*.

Wei Yuan said: in the fifteenth year of Emperor Jiaqing's reign, an imperial edict stated, "as to the important matter of administration the state, one must grasp the essential domestic and foreign situations, just as a doctor must find out the cause of a disease."  

Wei Yuan implied here that his study of history and geography of China and foreign countries and his enlightenment writings had great significance for state administration. He believed that administering the state was analogous with treating diseases—for both, the detecting of hidden causes is necessary.

He proceeded:

Wei Yuan said: for a state, comity is the best policy to avoid war, while defense works and military forces are the safeguards. The best strategy for a state is self-strengthening. The second best strategy is alliance-building according to its own needs and conditions.

Wei Yuan argued that a state must practice propriety in its foreign relations to avoid war; that military forces should only be used to safeguard national security; that a state must first stress on self-strengthening, and only secondly seek assistance through alliance-building. Hence we can see that Wei Yuan had already developed rudimentary
national conception and world consciousness. It shows that in his struggle to know about the world, Wei Yuan tried to define China's standing as a nation in the whole world. From the perspective of the world, Wei Yuan gave a good account of the types of nations and wars:

There are city states, nomadic states, and maritime states in the world. The nomadic peoples live in makeshift tents and are good horsemen and archers. In battles they sweep across the land as swift as wind and as fierce as thunderstorms. The maritime peoples excel in navigation and assaults with firearms. They cross dangerous and precipitous military strongholds with ease. The city states' strength lies in its high ramparts and deepditches, and its strategy of fortifying defense works and leaving no provision for the enemy. For centuries China has had coastal defense but lacked experience of actual sea warfare... If we can enforce the ban on opium with the same sternness in enforcing the pigtails decree, and clear the crops in the field to cut the enemy's provisions, and strengthen the defense works against the enemy's gunfire, opium will be eliminated with no fanfare, the enemy will be held at bay without a fighting. Therefore, we should use the defense strategy to minimize actual fighting, to gain advantageous bargaining positions in negotiations, and build up national strength to fend off foreign aggression.⁹

Wei Yuan differentiated three types of states: the city states, the nomadic states, and the maritime states. He argued that since ancient times China had lacked sea warfare experience, despite its coastal defense installations, and therefore would be at a disadvantage confronting at sea the Western countries that were at their best in sea warfare. China should, he argued, lay stress on a defensive strategy, and fend off the enemy's assault through consolidating national power. To fend off foreign aggression through internal strengthening thus becomes the starting point of Wei Yuan's strategic thinking. Although defense is the focal point of Wei Yuan's military strategy, defense is no simple matter. The defensive state must have high morale and domestic cohesion, as well as more or less equivalent military strength with the offensive state. And to achieve military parity with the Western countries, China must learn from the military technology of the West. To this end, Wei Yuan advanced the thesis
of "learning from the superior technology of the foreigners":

When the riot in Canton was not yet put down, the Westerners in Macao sent two warship, the English sent four warships, and they offered to help exterminated the pirates. The high-ranking local and court officials turned it down on the ground that it is absurd to rely on foreign assistance. While it might be justifiable not to draw support from foreign warships, it is utmosly unjustifiable to allow the insular states afar and our vassal states nearby look down upon China's military prowess as a result of refusing to learn from the superior technology of the foreign countries\(^{10}\).

Wei Yuan pointed out the reason why China must learn from the superior foreign technology was that China was comparatively weak in military strength, and hence was looked down upon by other countries far and near in the new international system that was beginning to take shape. Wei Yuan believed that learning from the superior Western technology was the only path to rehabilitate China's international standing. Therefore Wei Yuan's notion of "learning from the foreigners" closely related to the formulation of his world consciousness. National consciousness and world consciousness are closely interrelated, which constitutes one distinctive feature of Wei Yuan's thinking.

With regard to the specific methods of "learning from the foreigners," Wei Yuan proposed that one should know about the "foreign conditions" before adopting the Western technology:

In modern time the Western country England can also engage in intercourse with China through command of the Chinese language. One must get well acquainted with the foreign conditions if he strives to restrain and subdue the foreigners\(^{11}\).

In *The Haiguo Tuzhi*, he illustrated this point further and criticized strongly those people who stubbornly rejected the notion of learning from the west:

In today's case, if someone proposes to requisition Western warships, he would be refuted on the ground that drawing support from foreigners is a sign of weakness; yet those same people would readily acquiesce when China's weakness is manifested several times as much in military debacle. If someone proposes to adopt advanced foreign technology
and manufacture warships and arms, he would be charged of wasting technology and manpower; when they have to spend ten times as much in later contingencies, they would excuse themselves by saying that one should not be frugal in meeting the emergency. If someone proposes to translate foreign books, they would dub it as unnecessary; once disputes crop up, they are so ignorant of foreign conditions as to ask how far the English capital is from the Russian capital, or by what way England can reach Huibu. During the Opium War they rejected the obedient Nepal's offer to attack India to assist China; they were suspicious and indecisive when France and America offered to assist China with their warships and to act as mediators in Sino-British negotiations. England has had trade contacts with China for over two centuries, yet these people do not know its geographical location and its friends and foes in its foreign relations. Can these people boast of caring about foreign affairs?

Wei Yuan directed his attack at the Qing court. His enlightened ideas were quite alien to his contemporaries. A great gap existed between Wei Yuan's cognition of the West and that of rulers of the "Central Kingdom under Heaven." Wei Yuan's notion of learning from the West was not appreciated by them. In these and subsequent discussions, Wei Yuan disclosed the basic things that he believed China must learn from the West. These include: one, Western warships and other weaponry and machinery; two, foreign books. Specifically speaking, foreign warships and weaponry and machinery are the military technology of the West, while foreign books refer to the theories and information that ensure the Western military superiority, including Western astronomy, history, geography and other cultural knowledge. In other words, the former is the "qi" of the West, and the latter is the "zhi" of the West. Thus one can see that Wei Yuan approaches the superior technology of the West in two respects. He advises that at the same time as we are introducing foreign military equipment, we must know about the Western conditions and explore the background and principles from which the West derives its strength. Wei Yuan's concern with the Western "zhi" enables his modernization scheme to reach a higher theoretical level.

Wei Yuan reminded people:
People only know that warship and guns are the strong points of the West, but neglect the fact that the strength of the West does not just derive from warships and guns.  

Wei Yuan noticed that apart from its advanced weaponry, the Western military also had wholesome institution and sound methods of maintaining and commanding its troops. His cognition of the West thus transcends the material level to the ideological level. He mentioned in *The Haiguo Tuzhi* that England originally was a peripheral small power in Europe, and was not even self-sufficient in grain. However, due to its special stress on trade, it was able to establish an enormous army equipped with sophisticated warships and guns. Thus Wei Yuan had taken note of the relationship between military power and trade and economics. He also said that the English people were full of enterprising spirit and their ocean-going ships traversed the world's four oceans. They excelled in literature and arts, and were well acquainted with classics and law. They also set great store by military affairs. The English alphabet has only twenty-six letters, almost all English people were well versed in literature and arts, history, astronomy, geography, and he said that the English people were free to express their own opinions at the Parliament, and decisions were made according to majority rule.

The aforementioned accounts reflect Wei Yuan's major concerns. Similar descriptions can be found in the sections dealing with France, Holland, Portugal, Russia, and the United States. For instance, he gives high assessment of the American War of Independence and America democratic institutions. He thinks the United States is an ideal state that embodies military, resourcefulness, justice, fairness, wealth, and righteousness.

III

As can be seen from the above discussion, Wei Yuan's idea of "learning from the superior technology of the foreigners" was born out of the practical need of coastal defense, however, he eventually attained the plane of remolding his understanding of Western culture. Moreover, as his understanding of Western culture and social relations deepened, Wei Yuan
began to think about the divergence and convergence of Western and Chinese cultures, the relationship between Chinese culture and Chinese society, and other questions. He expounded his thought in *The Haiguo Tuzhi Xu* 海國圖志序. He pointed out emphatically that the writing of *The Haiguo Tuzhi* could only, after all, provide some general military strategy but could not solve the fundamental problem of subduing the enemy. The Western military technology was only tangible military power, not intangible military power. Here the "fundamental question of war" and "intangible military power" refer to social and cultural values, i.e., the ideological aspect of the social group and the individual. He argued that crisis resulted from not only military aggression from the sea, but also the void and inertia of people's minds. In the course "learning from the superior technology of the foreigners," Wei Yuan discovered that the power of the West was not only derived from its military strength, and the weakness of China could not be just attributed to the backwardness in military technology. Rather, the discrepancy could be attributed to the difference in people's mental states. His conclusion was that learning from the West embraced not only the military technology but also the Western culture. In the meantime, actions must be taken to transform the Chinese people's dejected and apathetic mental state and impractical way of thing. He called on people to:

Exterminate hypocrisy, stop whitewash, and put an end to harboring malicious sycophants and ganging up in pursuit of self-interest. If that is done, the inertia of the people would be eliminated. Attain real accomplishment by practical work, and evaluate one's work by real accomplishment. Prepare your mugwort three years prior to the moxibustion therapy. Make your net before fishing by the waterside. Do not take the risk crossing the river without a boat. Do not draw a cake to call it a dinner. If that is done, the ineptitude and superficiality of the people would be eradicated. Once people's minds are free from inertia and ineptness, our nation will be as vigorous as the rising sun, and as powerful as the thunderstorm.  

Wei Yuan reiterated that in order to free China of the foreign threat, people must get rid of the inertia and ineptness in their mind apart from learning from the Western military technology.
Obviously, in his exploring the way of utilizing superior Western technology, Wei Yuan came to realize that China suffered from the inertia of the people as well as military backwardness. Although he reaffirmed the universal applicability of traditional Chinese culture at the same time as he praised the United States for embodying military prowess, resourcefulness, justice, fairness, wealth, and righteousness, it only seems to intensify his sense of crisis over the declining Chinese culture. This sense of crisis eventually led to the transformation of his conception of Eastern and Western civilization.

Whether knowing about foreign conditions, or learning from the superior technology of the foreigners, or getting rid of the inertia in people's mind, is but the middle point in the Wei Yuan's thinking. The ultimate goal is to rejuvenate the nation and reestablish China's international standing—in Wei Yuan's own words, "to restrain the foreigners." Of course, "to restrain the foreigners" implies more than to make China militarily strong enough to counter the Western powers.

In order to understand more accurately Wei Yuan's conception of "restraining the foreigners," it is necessary for us to explore its deep connotations.

As above-mentioned, the original motivation of "learning from the foreigners" was to free China of the military threat of the West through utilizing West technology and eventually achieve the goal of "restraining the foreigners." Yet Wei Yuan's notion of "learning from the foreigners" was not merely out the concern with the Western threat. It is the logical deduction of traditional Chinese thinking, and therefore has its essential rationality. In ancient China there was the theory about the "Central Kingdom" and the "barbarians". This theory, known as the Gongyang 公羊 thinking, regards the "Central Kingdom" and "barbarians" as synonymous with "civilization" and "barbarism." But this is not to say that the distinction between the "Central Kingdom" and the "barbarians" is unchangeable, for as the Gongyang school claims, if the barbarous people adopts the culture of the "Central Kingdom," it will be embraced by the Central Kingdom; on the other hand, if peoples of the Central Kingdom no longer possess the cultural attributes of the Central Kingdom, they will become "barbarians." The relationship between the Central Kingdom and
"barbarians" is relative, not absolute. In the study of the relationship between Eastern and Western civilizations, the relativity principle of the Central Kingdom and barbarians provides the important theoretical basis for Wei Yuan's thinking, which bears the heritage of the Gongyuyang school. In fact, Wei Yuan's slogan of "learning from the foreigners" indicates that he realized that the Chinese culture in the Qing Dynasty and the Western culture were compatible, and that their relationship was nothing like that of the Central kingdom and the "barbarians" in its classical sense. In other words, he realized that China was not the center of the world, and Chinese culture was not the only embodiment of civilization. Although he continued to use such wording as "tian-xia 天下" 18) and "yi 夷" 19), these concepts have lost their original connotations. Here "tian-xia" may generally refer to "the five continents" or "the world"; and "yi" only retains the connotations of "foreign countries," or "the vile countries." Wei Yuan did not indiscriminately call all foreign countries "yi"—he called Great Britain who staged the infamous Opium War "ying-yi 英夷" 20), but did not call the United States "mei-yi 美夷" 21); on the contrary, as was mentioned above, he looked upon the United States as an ideal state, the land of justice, and a civilized nation which China should model herself on.

In sum, though Wei Yuan's notion of "restraining the foreigners" was aimed at the pressing problems of foreign aggression, he did not take it as his only objective to counter foreign aggression with armed forces. His notion bears greater strategic significance. His aim was to integrate Eastern and Western civilizations and eventually surpass the West both ideologically and culturally and attain for China a leading role in the world.

Such was the understatement of Wei Yuan when he stressed repeatedly in The Haiguo Tuzhi xu that learning from the West could only acquire some military strategy, but could not answer the fundamental question of war. To cope with the problem of deep-rooted deficiency in people's minds, on the one hand he called on people to learn from the West, and on the other he put up the slogan of "revitalizing traditional Chinese culture." This was also out of the need of his cultural strategy. He hoped to seek food from modern Western and traditional Chinese culturals to nourish the new Chinese civilization. Both "learning from the foreigners" and "revitalizing traditional Chinese culture" were important
approaches to his cultural strategy. For the first time in modern history, Wei Yuan's thinking kindled the fire of hope for those Chinese who were pursuing their ideal world.

1) Literally, the Chinese word "tian-xia" means "land under Heaven." It may refer to China or the world in different contexts. The Chinese literati used to know little about outside the domain of the Chinese empire and thought of China as the center of the world and the only embodiment of civilization, and foreign peoples as "barbarians."

2) The "looper" allude to those capitulationist mandarins who bowed to foreign aggressors.

3) A Chinese fable says that a man named Zhu Ping-man went to Zhi Li-yi to learn from him the skill of slaughtering dragons. After three years of hard exercise and using up all his money, he finally learned the skill, only to find there were no dragon for him to slaughter. Hence people use "the skill of slaughtering dragons" to refer to impractical skill. Here the "dragon-slaughter" allegorize those arrogant but incompetent Qing officials.

4) Wei Yuan uses the allusion here to remind people to take precautions beforehand against foreign aggression.

5) XIV, The Shengwu Ji 聖武記.

6) P.206, Wei Yuan Ji 魏源集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976).

7) VIII, The Shengwu Ji 聖武記.

8) VI, The Shengwu Ji 聖武記.

9) VIII, The Shengwu Ji 聖武記.

10) VIII, The Shengwu Ji 聖武記.

11) XII, The Shengwu Ji 聖武記.

12) an ancient Muslim people in Northwest China.

13) "Yizhan 議戰 (On War)", P.139, Chouhai Pian, 簪海篇, The Haiguo Tuzhi 海國圖志. Guwei House, the twenty-fourth year in the reign of Emperor Daoguang.

14) Physical apparatus.

15) Cultural knowledge.

16) "Yizhan", P.12.

17) The Haiguo Tuzhi Xu 海國圖志序.

18) Land under heaven.

19) Barbarians.

20) The English barbarians.

21) The American barbarians.