

Introduction

You, O king, live beyond the confines of many seas; nevertheless, impelled by your humble desire to partake of the benefits of our civilisation, you have despatched a mission respectfully bearing your memorial...To show your devotion, you have also sent offerings of your country's produce. I have read your memorial; the earnest terms in which it is cast reveal a respectful humility on your part which is highly praiseworthy.

Swaying the wide world, I have but one aim, namely, to maintain perfect governance and fulfil the duties of the state. Strange and ingenious objects do not interest me. I have no use for your country's manufactures. It behoves you, O king, to respect my sentiments and display even greater devotion and loyalty in future, so that by perpetual submission to our throne, you may secure peace and prosperity for your country. Tremblingly obey and show no negligence. (Qianlong, quoted in *The Economist*, December 31st 1999, Millennium Special Edition, p. 76)

In 1792, the British King George III sent a trade mission to China. The Emperor Qianlong apparently was not impressed by the visit and the gifts. He gave King George's envoy the message quoted above to take back. For Qianlong, and many other Chinese people at that time, China was at the centre of the world. All foreigners were peripheral and barbarian. The Chinese had no interest in knowing or understanding foreign people and cultures.

About one hundred years later, the British returned, bringing other 'strange and ingenious objects'- warships and cannons. This time, they came from the new world empire, and along with other Western empires, had no intention of submitting to the old Oriental emperor's throne. Instead, they intended to conquer and exploit the vast Chinese Empire by means of their overwhelming modern military and technological forces. Modern imperialism almost destroyed the old Empire. Since then, the Chinese people embarked on a long journey of national revival and modernisation with Chinese characteristics, a journey that at the same time has been profoundly influenced by Western styles of modernity.

This journey is not over yet. The civil war of 1949 divided the country into two separate political entities, one located on the mainland and the other on Taiwan Island.

