

EXCERPTS FROM "ON THE ADOPTION OF WESTERN LEARNING"
By Feng Guifen

Introduction

In the aftermath of Qing defeat in the Opium War (1839-1842) and the Arrow War (1856-1859), a number of Qing officials put forth and put into action proposals meant to increase the empire's military strength by adopting Western military and industrial technology and other Western techniques.

Feng Guifen (1809-1874) was one of the leaders of this effort. Feng was a classically educated scholar who had a successful career as an official in his own right, but also as an advisor to the leading Qing statesmen of the mid-nineteenth century.

In the essay from which the following excerpt was taken, Feng discussed Western learning and its role in the Qing empire.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from "On the Adoption of Western Learning"
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Books on mathematics, mechanics, optics, light, chemistry, and others all contain the ultimate principles of understanding things. Most of this information is unavailable to people in China. ...

I have heard that with their new methods the Westerners have found that the movements of the earth conform closely to those of the heavens. This can be of assistance in fixing the calendar. ... I have heard that the Westerners' method of clearing sand from harbors is very effective. ... This can be of assistance to keep the water flowing. Also, for agricultural and sericultural tools, and things required for the various crafts, they mostly use mechanical wheels, which require little energy but accomplish much. ...

There are many intelligent people in China. Surely there are some who, having learned from the barbarians, can surpass them ...

**Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on
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Questions:

1. What does Feng Guifen see as China's weaknesses?
2. When Feng Guifen looks at the west, what sort of things does he notice and draw the attention of his fellow Chinese to? Are there aspects of the West which would be relevant to the goal of strengthening China, but which Feng does not notice?
3. Compare Feng Guifen's analysis of the West and the implied actions that China should take with the later analysis of Chu Chengbo's position in "Reforming Men's Minds."

Longer Selection

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... Today the world is 90,000 *li* around. There is no place boats and vehicles do not travel or human power does not reach. ... According to Westerners' maps, there are at least one hundred countries in the world. Of the books of these hundred countries, only those from Italy from the time of the end of the Ming and from present-day England, numbering in all several tens, have been translated. ...

Books on mathematics, mechanics, optics, light, chemistry, and others all contain the ultimate principles of understanding things. Most of this information is unavailable to people in China. ...

I have heard that with their new methods the Westerners have found that the movements of the earth conform closely to those of the heavens. This can be of assistance in fixing the calendar. ... I have heard that the Westerners' method of clearing sand from harbors is very effective. ... This can be of assistance to keep the water flowing. Also, for agricultural and sericultural tools, and things required for the various crafts, they mostly use mechanical wheels, which require little energy but accomplish much. These can assist the people to earn their living. Other things beneficial to the national economy and the livelihood of the people should also be used. ...

There are many intelligent people in China. Surely there are some who, having learned from the barbarians, can surpass them ...

The principles of government are derived from learning. In discussing good government, [the famous historian] Sima Qian [Ssu-ma Ch'ien] said, "Take the later kings as models," because they were closer to his own time, and customs, having changed, were more alike, so that their ideas were easy to implement because they were plain and simple. In my

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humble opinion, at the present time it is also appropriate to say "Learn from the various nations," for they are similar to us and hence their ways are easy to implement. What could be better than to take Chinese ethical principles of human relations and Confucian teachings as the foundation, (*ti*) and supplement them with the techniques (*yong*) of wealth and power of the various nations?