

Criticism and Reflection: A Brief Analysis of the Concept of "Closing the Country"-Based on the Relevant Cognition in the Works of Scholars during the Republic of China Period

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Abstract: The Closed Door policy during the Ming and Qing dynasties has long been a focal point in academic history. Most scholars believe that this policy was the primary, if not the main, reason for Chinas gradual decline relative to the West during this period, which is widely accepted as the mainstream view. This paper analyzes the understanding of the Closed Door policy found in the works of scholars from the Republic of China era, focusing on works such as Jiang Tingfus A Modern History of China, Chen Gonglus A History of China in the Last Century, and Lu Simians Lectures on a Modern History of China. By examining the content related to the Closed Door policy in these works, the paper aims to summarize the prevailing social views of the Republic of China era.

1. The Formation of Problem Awareness under the Background of the Times

"Closed-door policy" is a policy adopted by the Chinese government during the Ming and Qing Dynasties to restrict foreign exchanges and trade. It mainly manages Chinas foreign exchanges through strict means and methods, hoping to maintain feudal rule and national security.

The policy of seclusion not only strictly restricted foreign merchants and envoys from entering China, but also closely monitored their activities in the country, prohibiting them from staying for extended periods or venturing into inland areas. The Qing Dynasty also imposed strict controls on Chinese peoples overseas travel and immigration, with violators facing severe penalties, and all movements were strictly regulated. In terms of trade, the number of open ports was limited to a few, allowing only limited official trade. Free trade among civilians was strictly prohibited, and direct transactions between the mainland and foreign merchants were forbidden. During trade, the export of goods was strictly controlled, and imports of Western industrial products were also restricted. The Qing Dynasty maintained a high level of vigilance against Western technology, ideas, and culture, and strictly limited cultural exchanges between China and the West.

Since the Opium War, China has been defeated repeatedly by western powers and other countries, forced to sign a series of unequal treaties, national sovereignty lost, national dignity trampled. This painful history forced intellectuals to start to reflect deeply on the reasons why China lags behind the world.

The policy of isolationism is widely seen as a key factor in Chinas backwardness during the

modern era. Most scholars argue that the isolationist policies during the Ming and Qing dynasties isolated China from deeper global engagement, leading to technological backwardness, ideological rigidity, military weakness, and national decline, ultimately making it unable to resist foreign aggression. The saying backwardness invites aggression reflects the common belief among scholars of the Republic of China that the old path of isolation and self-preservation had completely failed. They sought to understand why China lagged behind the world by examining history, aiming to find solutions for national salvation and survival.

In the context of national crisis and social transformation, scholars in the Republican Period closely linked the discussion of Qing foreign policy with the fate of modern China through interpretation, which not only revealed historical facts but also implied reflection on reality.

2. The Critical Voices in the Works of Scholars in the Republic of China

2.1 Jiang Tingfu: Closed Mind Misses the Opportunity of Modernization

Jiang Tingfu (December 7, 1895-October 9, 1965), styled Shouzhang and known by his pen name Qingquan, was a renowned Chinese historian and diplomat from Shaoyang, Hunan. Given the political climate of his time and his diplomatic background, Jiang had a deep understanding of diplomacy. He advocated for a rational and mutually beneficial approach to foreign relations. In his book "A Modern History of China," he offered a diplomats keen insight into the Qing Dynastys policy of isolationism.

According to "*A Modern History of China*", "Before the 19th century, there were no diplomatic relations between China and the West. The Western countries did not send envoys to China, and we did not send ambassadors or ministers abroad."^[1] The reasons for this are quite complex. This is mainly due to two factors: first, the vast distance between China and the West. "At that time, and the inconvenient transportation. At that time, commerce was limited, and the goods Westerners bought from China were mainly silk, tea, and other luxury items. Our economy was self-sufficient, and we did not need any Western products. Therefore, our international trade had a significant surplus." There was also a lack of deep economic and trade interactions between the two sides. The traditional small-scale peasant economy in Chinese society was sufficient for self-sufficiency, so the idea of foreign trade was weak, and external exchanges were minimal.

Moreover, the most significant reason is the unequal interaction between the two sides, primarily because China does not recognize the equality of other countries. "When Westerners come to China, we always treat them as if they were Ryukyans or Koreans. If they do not come, we do not force them to. They must respect China as the superior nation and consider themselves vassals. This issue of etiquette and protocol becomes a major obstacle to diplomatic relations, and the Celestial Empire is absolutely unwilling to compromise."^[1] From the Qing governments perspective at the time, Westerners were also considered barbarians, ignorant of propriety, righteousness, integrity, and shame. Therefore, when Westerners came to China, they had to acknowledge China as their vassal state and refer to China as the Celestial Empire. In the Qing governments view, these foreigners came to China primarily for economic reasons. Since they were greedy for profit, the Celestial Empire would grant them special treatment, allowing them to do business, provided they acknowledged the status and position of the Celestial Empire. This was called pacifying the barbarians. If they did not recognize the Celestial Empire and sought equality, the Celestial Empire would use military and other means to suppress the barbarians. Jiang Tingfu pointed out that at that time, China did not know about diplomacy; it only knew about suppressing the barbarians and pacifying the barbarians."

At the time, Westerners were initially dissatisfied with the trading system set by the Qing government, but they found it difficult to trade in China and had to tolerate these restrictive policies.

However, the situation changed in the 18th century. The British, through the Industrial Revolution, significantly enhanced their economic and military power, and their influence on the global stage grew. To further establish diplomatic relations with China and transform the trade model, Britain sent Lord Macartney as a plenipotentiary to China. Due to differences in etiquette, Emperor Qianlong not only demanded that Macartney leave Beijing immediately after meeting him but also rejected all of his requests. The British peace mission failed completely. Later, during the reign of Emperor Jiaqing, another mission to China failed. "The relationship between China and the West is unique. Before the Opium War, we refused to grant foreign countries equal treatment; afterward, they refused to give us the same equal treatment. China missed the opportunity to integrate into the world trend and was eventually forced to open its doors in the Opium War.

Jiang Tingfu viewed the constraints of traditional ideas as the root cause of the Qing governments stagnation. The geographical isolation, the notion of China as the Celestial Empire, and the neglect of the West repeatedly caused China to miss opportunities for deeper engagement with global trends. In the final part of this chapter, he stated, "If we boldly step into the world, we need significant reforms; otherwise, we cannot compete with the great powers. However, we have the human and material resources to match foreigners. With this determination, we can achieve a more glorious status in the 19th-century world. When studying our nations modern history, we must understand that modern diplomacy is both a major challenge and a significant opportunity."^[1]

2.2 Chen Gonglu: Institutional Rigidity Leads to Diplomatic Conflict (Lubbock Incident)

Chen Gonglu (July 28, 1900-October 8, 1966) was a historian from Dantu, Jiangsu province. He wrote "*Modern History of China*", "*Modern History of China in the Last 100 Years*", "*Complete History of Japan*" and so on.

In his book "*A History of China in the Last Century*", he points out that "in the mid-19th century, the international situation underwent a fundamental transformation. Despite this, China still clung to the ancient concept of the distinction between Chinese and foreigners, looking down on foreigners and failing to understand their internal conditions, political systems, and academic ideas, as well as the strength of its land and naval forces and the advantages of its industry and commerce. Consequently, it was unable to recognize the issues of the new era and lacked appropriate methods to address them, leading to repeated failures in negotiations with foreign powers."^[2]

The Qing government initially opened the ports of Guangzhou, Xiamen, Quanzhou, and Ningbo for trade, but later restricted it to Guangzhou alone, and the trade had to be monopolized by officially designated traders. British merchants also sought permission to open their ports in the north, but all their requests were rejected by the Qing government. The Qing government believed that foreign merchants depended on Chinese tea and rhubarb for their livelihood.

Furthermore, the Qing government lacked a clear sense of sovereignty when it came to territorial issues. It not only turned a blind eye to the British and French aggression against its vassal states like Burma and Annam but also failed to develop effective strategies in response to Britains control over India Xizang and Russias encroachment on the northwest and the Heilongjiang River basin. The officials and border governors were unfamiliar with the concept of national territorial sovereignty, and the idea of sovereignty had not yet taken root in peoples minds.

In terms of religion, Jesuit missionaries came to China at the end of the Ming Dynasty to spread Western scientific knowledge. Initially, the Qing government welcomed and even valued these advancements. However, after Emperor Yongzheng, the Qing government began to strictly prohibit Christianity in China, viewing it as a threat to moral values.

After explaining the conservatism and backwardness of the Qing government in trade, territory and religion, Chen Gonglu further analyzed the backwardness of the Qing government compared

with the West through the Lue Lao Bi incident.

Liu Laobi refused to follow the Qing tradition of passing official documents through travel merchants and insisted on meeting directly with the Viceroy of Liangguang, Lu Kun. Lu Kun, citing this concerns the national body and cannot be compromised in any way, which would lead to contempt, ordered the cessation of trade and the deployment of troops for defense. British warships forcibly entered Huangpu, leading to a military standoff between the two sides. Later, Liu Laobi left Guangzhou due to illness, and the British side temporarily compromised, with the British warships withdrawing from Huangpu, allowing trade to resume.

"Lawabie demanded equal treatment and sent a direct letter, which was the natural international practice, but the habits of China and foreign countries were different."^[2] It was difficult to apply to China in the early years of the Daoguang era. Lulabi came to China with the mission of peace and friendship, but only caused a bad situation. What a pity! Chen Gonglu expressed regret over this outcome, noting that the conflict essentially stemmed from the clash between two systems: the Qing Dynasty, which clung to the Celestial Empire system and its policy of isolationism, viewed equal diplomacy as a threat to national dignity. In contrast, Britain promoted international norms, advocating for free trade and equal diplomatic relations. The Qing Dynastys policies were fundamentally the result of despotism and ignorance, and the Lubei incident highlighted the Qing courts disregard for international rules and the rigidity and backwardness of its own ideology. As the clash between these two systems and ideologies intensified, it ultimately led to war. The loss of control on the frontier, trade imbalances, and cultural barriers collectively set the stage for the Opium War.

2.3 Lu Simian: The Cognitive Gap Intensifies the Opposition between China and the West

Lu Simian (February 27, 1884--October 9, 1957), styled Chengzhi and pen name Niu Niu, Cheng Yun, etc., was a historian and master of Sinology in modern China. He wrote "The Vernacular History of the Country", "Lus General History of China", "The History of Qin and Han", "The History of Pre-Qin" and so on.

As a scholar who experienced the transition from the Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, Lu Simian had a lot of feelings about the Qing Dynastys policy of closing the country.

In his "Lectures on Modern Chinese History," he provides a detailed account of the foreign trade relations before the Daoguang period. He notes, "Initially, Chinas interactions with Westerners were limited to trade and missionary activities. Trade is mutually beneficial, and missionary work does not harm us. We are not barbarians; why should we fear that they might use missionary activities to secretly take our people? The scientific knowledge of missionaries can also serve our interests. Therefore, we should welcome them with an open mind, as it would be truly beneficial to us. However, at that time, we had no understanding of the Western world. We feared that trade might turn into piracy, and missionary activities might lead to the Yellow Turbans or the White Lotus rebels. Moreover, we had never seen such advanced ships and cannons from foreigners, nor had we ever seen such scientifically knowledgeable missionaries. Thus, we suspected they had ulterior motives and could not help but be wary. The Westerners, on the other hand, were completely ignorant of China, perceiving it as a vast and arrogant nation, stubborn and unresponsive. With such deep-seated misunderstandings, conflicts were inevitable. The changes after the Daoguang period were certainly not due to a single event."^[3]

The Qing government was completely unaware of the Western situation, believing that Western trade was a facade and their acts of piracy were real. They also equated the missionaries preaching with local heretical sects like the Yellow Turban and White Lotus Sects. Having never encountered such a powerful enemy with strong ships and powerful guns or scientists who possessed science,

they suspected and feared ulterior motives. This reflects the backwardness and stubborn arrogance of the Qing government. Moreover, Lu Simian believed that the science of the missionaries could be of great use to us. He thought that Western science and technology were resources that the Qing court could utilize at the time, but the court failed to capitalize on this opportunity. This closed and backward policy ultimately led to the gradual decline of the Qing government after the Daoguang era.

Lu Simian, in his work "The Pre-Part of Modern Chinese History," also reviewed the history of Sino-Western interactions. The Qing Dynasty's maritime ban policy largely followed that of previous dynasties. However, with the resolution of the Taiwan, China issue, the Qing gradually eased its maritime restrictions and further opened certain coastal areas to address economic and livelihood concerns. This led to the formation of a foreign trade management system centered around Guangzhou, monopolized by licensed merchants. This system was plagued by severe corruption, unfairness, and monopolistic practices, which caused strong dissatisfaction among foreign merchants. Later, during the Qianlong period, the Qing court, for reasons of management and security, reduced foreign trade to Guangzhou. The state of the pound. Britain, as the leading trading nation at the time, tried to change this long-standing situation through diplomatic means. Adverse trade terms were firmly rejected by the Qing court. During the Jiaqing period, Britain exploited European wars and the issue of pirates along China's coast to seek new opportunities for intervention and gain benefits under the pretext of protecting trade and assisting in the suppression of piracy. However, all British demands were rejected. The Qing court's rigid and corrupt foreign trade system had deep-seated problems, and there was a significant gap between China and the West in terms of ideology, diplomatic etiquette, and other aspects. Conventional negotiations failed to resolve the fundamental contradictions, setting the stage for a series of subsequent wars.

In addition to their research and analysis of the Qing government's policy of closing the country, these three scholars also discussed the serious consequences brought by this policy.

3. Concept Analysis and Historical Reflection

Most scholars in the Republican period believed that China had implemented a "closed-door" policy before the Opium War. Tao Xisheng discussed the diplomatic policies of closing and opening up in successive dynasties in one article.^[4] To a certain extent, it traces the historical origins of closed-door policy; in *A Brief Discussion on Social History from the Warring States to the Qing Dynasty*, it examines the implementation of the closed-door policy, arguing that the debate between free foreign trade and isolationism has lasted for a thousand years, from the Song to the Yuan, and through the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The debate between free foreign trade and isolationism runs through the Song to the Ming and Qing Dynasties.^[5] Whether in the Republic of China or modern times, when mentioning the Qing Dynasty, closed-door policy is inevitably mentioned, which seems to have become a label for the Qing Dynasty. However, modern research indicates that the term closed-door policy has not been found in ancient documents, and it is not a traditional Chinese historical concept.^[6]

The term closed country specifically refers to the relationship between countries, where one country isolates itself from others, severing all economic, political, cultural, and other forms of relations. The term closed country was used to describe the foreign policy of the Ming and Qing dynasties, reflecting the influence of Western centrism at that time, rather than an objective description of the policies. Scholars in the Republic of China era, limited by their times, focused entirely on the Qing Dynasty's foreign policy when analyzing its backwardness. However, their critique of the Qing Dynasty's closed policies provided a crucial perspective for later generations to understand the challenges faced by modern China. Although the concept of closed country is often

unclear and exaggerated, it is true that the Qing governments conservative mindset, which failed to recognize global trends and rejected advanced science and technology, was a significant factor in Chinas lagging behind the world at that time^[7].

4. Conclusion

The research of scholars from the Republic of China has profoundly influenced later generations understanding of Qing history. Their studies on the concept of closed country are a product of academic exploration and the times. Scholars such as Jiang Tingfu, Chen Gonglu, and Lu Simian have critiqued the policies of the closed country through their works, while other scholars have offered different perspectives, highlighting the diversity of academic thought. Their research is not merely a historical narrative but also carries a strong sense of contemporary relevance, aiming to draw lessons from history to inform the reforms and national salvation efforts of the Republic of China era. However, the research of these scholars also has its limitations, which to some extent have influenced the mainstream social perception. In the majority of peoples minds, "closing the country" is conservative, backward and is conservative, bakward and closed, but this is not the whole picture of Ming and Qing society. "Closing the country" cannot be used as a label for Ming and Qing society. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, China also had a profound influence on the West and made indelible contributions to the world, which is an objective historical fact.

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