

Economic developments of the last few years prove that, while maintaining a just balance between expenditures and income, we can and should undertake productive national works that will nourish, more especially, our public education and our national industry.

And since I speak of our national industry, I must add that it is weak and uncertain because of lack of confidence on the part of capital and because of our general resistance to opening up and utilizing its beneficial currents.

If, following the example of Washington and the great republic of the North, we preferred to consume our national production, even if it is not as finished and perfect as the foreign production; if the farmer, the miner, and the manufacturer constructed their tools and machines whenever possible in our country's workshops; if we broadened and made more varied production of our raw materials, processing and transforming them into objects useful for life or personal comfort; if we ennobled industrial labor, increasing wages in proportion to the greater skill of our working class; if the state, while maintaining a balance between revenues and expenditures, devoted a portion of its resources to the protection of national industry, nourishing and supporting it during its first trials; if the state, with its resources and legislation, and all of us together, collectively and singly, applied ourselves to producing more and better consuming what we produce, then a more vigorous sap would circulate through the industrial organism of the Republic, and increased wealth and well-being would give us the possession of that supreme good of an industrious and honorable people; the capacity to live and clothe ourselves by our own unaided efforts.

24.7 | Li Hung-Chang, *A Report to the Emperor: Problems of Industrialization* (1872)

Having lost a series of wars with Britain and other European powers in the 1840s and 1850s, some Chinese officials became interested in the role that industry played in the swift rise of Europe to global eminence. The scholar-official Li Hung-Chang (1823–1901) was one of these officials, especially because he had fought in the Taiping Rebellion and seen the force of Western guns up close. His concerns were the “self-strengthening” that the Chinese government had called for in the aftermath of the Opium War and Taiping Rebellion and he supported change, as we see in this excerpt from a report he wrote in defense of steamship building. Most others, however, had a vested interest in preserving China's social system: industrialization for them would throw people out of work, lead to banditry, and provoke the kinds of rebellions and war that erupted in Europe in the nineteenth century.

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We have seen with admiration the Sacred Emperor's vigorous striving for self-strengthening and for laying down broad far-reaching plans. Our admiration is beyond telling. Your minister has been thinking that the various European countries in the last several decades have advanced from India to the southern oceans, from the southern oceans to the northeast, and have invaded China's frontiers and interior land. Peoples never recorded in previous histories, who have had no contact with us since ancient times, have come to our points of entry to ask for trade relations. Our Emperors have been as generous as the sky and have made treaties with all of them for international trade in order to control them. People from a distance of ninety thousand *li*, from the cardinal points of the globe, are gathering together in China; this is the greatest change during the last three millennia and more!

The Westerners particularly rely upon the excellence and efficacy of their guns, cannon, and steamships, and so they can overrun China. The bow and spear, small guns, and native-made cannon which have hitherto been used by China cannot resist their rifles, which have their bullets fed from the rear opening. The sailing boats, rowboats, and the gunboats which have been hitherto employed cannot oppose their steam-engined warships. Therefore, we are controlled by the Westerners.

To live today and still say “reject the barbarians” and “drive them out of our territory” is certainly superficial and absurd talk. Even though we wish to preserve the peace and to protect our territory, we cannot preserve and protect them unless we have the right weapons. They are daily producing their weapons to strive with us for supremacy and victory, pitting their superior techniques against our inadequacies, to wrangle with and to affront us. Then how can we get along for one day without weapons and techniques?

The method of self-strengthening lies in learning what they can do, and in taking over what they rely upon. Moreover, their possession of guns, cannons, and steamships began only within the last hundred years or so, and their progress has been so fast that their influence has spread into China. If we can really and thoroughly understand their methods—and the more we learn, the more improve—and promote them further and further, can we not expect that after a century or so we can reject the barbarians and stand on our own feet? Japan is just a small nation. Recently she has begun to trade with Europe; she has instituted iron factories and built many steamships. She has changed to the use of Western weapons. Does she have the ambition to plot and invade the Western nations? Perhaps she is merely planning for self-protection. But if Japan seeks only self-protection, she is nevertheless oppressing and looking down on our China. Should not China plan for herself? Our scholars and officials have confined themselves to the study of stanzas and sentences and are ignorant of the greatest change of the last several thousand years; they are accustomed to the temporary security of the present, and so they forget why we received the heavy blow and deep suffering of twenty or thirty years ago [the Opium War], and how we can obtain the domestic security and control the foreigners within several centuries. That is how this talk of stopping steamship construction has originated.