

THE CHINESE VICTORY (Part I)

Without some basic historical knowledge, the subject I am dealing with would not be understood.

In Europe, people had heard about China. In the autumn of 1298, Marco Polo told marvelous tales about an amazing country he called Cathay. Columbus, an intelligent and intrepid sailor, was aware of the Greeks' knowledge about the roundness of the Earth. His own observations led him to coincide with those theories. He came up with the plan of reaching the Far East sailing westward from Europe. But, he calculated the distance with far too much optimism, for it was several times greater. Unexpectedly, between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans, this continent loomed up on his route. Magellan would make the journey conceived by him, even though he died before reaching Europe. Still, the voyage was paid with the value of the spices gathered, and the trip begun with several vessels, out of which only one returned, was a prelude of future colossal profits.

Since those days, the world began to change at an accelerated pace. Old forms of exploitation were repeated again, from slavery to feudal serfdom; ancient and new religious beliefs spread over the planet.

From that fusion of cultures and events, accompanied by technical advances and scientific discoveries, today's world was born, and it could not be understood without a minimum of real precedents.

International trade, with its advantages and disadvantages, was imposed by the colonial powers, such as Spain, England and the other European powers. These, especially England, soon began to control southwest, south and southeast Asia, and Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand, forcibly expanding its rule everywhere. The colonizers were not able to impose their authority over the gigantic country of China, which had an ancient culture and fabulous natural and human resources.

Direct trade between Europe and China began in the sixteenth century, after the Portuguese established the commercial enclave at Goa in India and at Macao in southern China.

Spanish control in the Philippines facilitated an accelerated exchange with the great Asian country. The Qing dynasty, which ruled China, tried to limit this kind of unfavorable commercial operation with foreign countries as much as possible. It was allowed only through the port of Canton, today called Guangzhou. Great Britain and Spain had great deficits because of the low demand of the enormous Asiatic country, related to English goods manufactured in the metropolis, or Spanish products coming from the New World which were not essential to China. Both of them had begun to sell opium.

Large-scale opium trade was at first dominated by the Dutch through Jakarta, Indonesia. The English observed the profits that were close to 400 percent. Their opium exports which, in 1730, were 15 tons, grew to 75 in 1773, shipped in crates weighing 70 kilograms each; with this they bought porcelain, silks, spices and Chinese tea. Opium, not gold, was the currency Europe used to acquire Chinese goods.

In the spring of 1830, faced with the unbridled abuse of the opium trade in China, Emperor Daoguang ordered Lin Hse Tsu, an Imperial official, to fight the plague; he ordered the destruction of 20 thousand crates of opium. Lin Hse Tsu sent a letter to Queen Victoria asking for respect of international standards and that she forbid the trade with toxic drugs.

The Opium Wars were the English response. The first of them lasted three years, from 1839 to 1842. The second, with France joining in, lasted four years, from 1856 to 1860. They are also known as the Anglo-Chinese Wars.

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The United Kingdom forced China to sign unfair treaties committing this country to opening up several ports to foreign trade and handing over Hong Kong. Several countries, following England's lead, imposed unequal terms of exchange.

Such humiliation contributed to the Taiping Rebellion of 1850 to 1864, the Boxer Rebellion of 1899 to 1901 and, finally, the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 that, for various reasons –including their weakness in the face of foreign powers– had become highly unpopular in China.

What happened with Japan?

This country with its ancient culture and very hard-working ethic, like others in the region, resisted “western civilization” and for more than 200 years –among other causes because of a chaotic domestic administration– it remained hermetically sealed to foreign trade.

In 1854, after an earlier exploratory voyage with four gunboats, a U.S. naval expedition commanded by Commodore Matthew Perry, threatening to bomb a Japanese town – defenseless before the modern technology of those vessels– obliged the shoguns to sign, on behalf of the Emperor, the Treaty of Kanagawa on March 31, 1854. Thus, the insertion of capitalist trade and western technology was begun in Japan. At the time, Europeans were unaware of the Japanese capacity to develop in that field.

On the heels of the Yankees, representatives of the Russian Empire arrived from the Far East, fearful that the U.S., to whom they later sold Alaska on October 18, 1867, would get a head-start on them in the trade activities with Japan. Great Britain and the other European colonizing nations arrived quickly in the country, with the same intentions.

During the U.S. intervention in 1847, Perry occupied different parts of Mexico. At the end of the war, the country lost more than 50 percent of its territory, precisely those areas where the greatest oil and gas reserves were to be found, even though at that time, gold and land to expand into, not fuel, were the main goals of the conquerors.

The first China-Japan War was officially declared on August 1, 1894. At the time Japan wanted Korea, a tributary state subordinated to China. With more developed weaponry and technology, it defeated Chinese forces in several battles near the cities of Seoul and Pyongyang. Later military victories opened their way towards Chinese territory.

In the month of November in that year, they took Port Arthur, today Lüshun. In the River Yalu estuary and at the Weihaiwei Naval Base, surprised by a land attack from the Liaodong Peninsula, heavy Japanese artillery destroyed the fleet of the attacked nation.

The dynasty had to ask for peace. The Treaty of Shimonoseki, which put an end to the war, was signed in April of 1895. China was forced to cede Taiwan, the Liaodong Peninsula and the archipelago of the Pescadores Islands to Japan “in perpetuity”; China also had to pay a war indemnity of 200 million taels of silver and open up four ports to the exterior. Russia, France and Germany, defending their individual interests, obliged Japan to return the Liaodong Peninsula, paying in exchange another 30 million taels of silver.

Before mentioning the second China-Japan War, I should include another armed episode with a double historical importance; it took place between 1904 and 1905 and it cannot be omitted.

After being inserted into armed civilization and wars for the partitioning of the world as imposed by the West, Japan, which had already waged the first war against China as mentioned above, developed its naval power to such a degree that it was able to deal a harsh blow to the Russian Empire which was at the point of prematurely inciting the revolution programmed by Lenin when he created in Minsk, ten years prior, the Party which would later unleash the October Revolution.

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On August 10, 1904, with no advance warning, Japan attacked and destroyed the Russian Pacific Fleet at Shandong. Czar Nicholas II of Russia, upset by the attack, ordered the Baltic Fleet to be mobilized and to set sail for the Far East. Convoys of colliers were contracted to bring in the shipments needed by the fleet while it was sailing towards its distant destination. One of the operations to transfer coal had to be carried out on the high seas due to diplomatic pressures.

The Russians, upon entering south China, sailed towards Vladivostok, the only available port for the fleet's operations. In order to arrive at that point, there were three routes: the best choice was the Tsushima route; the other two required navigation to the east of Japan and increased the risks and the enormous wear and tear on the vessels and crews. The Japanese admiral had the same thought: for this option he prepared his plan and located his ships so that the Japanese Fleet, after making a U-turn, would have all its vessels, mainly cruisers, passing about 6 thousand meters away from the adversary's ships, a large number of battleships. These would be at the reach of the Japanese cruisers, outfitted with personnel that were rigorously trained in the use of their cannon. As a result of the lengthy route, the Russian battleships were navigating at a speed of only 8 knots as compared with the 16 knot speed of the Japanese vessels.

The military action is known by the name of Battle of Tsushima. It took place on May 27th and 28th of 1905.

On the side of the Russian Empire, 11 battleships and 8 cruisers took part.

Admiral of the Fleet: Zinovy Rozhdestvensky.

Losses: 4,380 dead, 5,917 wounded, 21 ships sunk, 7 captured and 6 rendered useless.

The Admiral of the Russian Fleet was wounded by a shell fragment that hit him in the skull.

On the side of the Japanese Empire, 4 battleships and 27 cruisers took part.

Admiral of the Fleet: Heichachiro Togo

Losses: 117 dead, 583 wounded and 3 torpedo ships sunk.

The Baltic Fleet was destroyed. Napoleon would have termed it "Austerlitz at sea". Anyone can imagine the deep wound caused by the dramatic event to traditional Russian pride and patriotism.

After the battle, Japan became a much feared naval power, rivaling Great Britain and Germany and competing with the United States.

Japan rehabilitated the concept of the battleship as the principal weapon in the years to come. They embroiled themselves in the task of empowering the Imperial Japanese Army. They requested and paid a British shipbuilder to construct a special cruiser, with the intent of later reproducing it in their Japanese shipbuilding yards. Later, they manufactured battleships that were much better than those of their contemporaries, both in amour and power.

There was no other nation on the face of the earth that could come close to Japanese naval engineering in the 1930's in the design of war ships.

That explains the bold action with which, one day, they attacked their master and rival, the United States which, through Commodore Perry, started them off on their path of war.

I shall continue tomorrow.

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