

Fall of a Giant: The Unequal Treaties and China's Downfall

Jason Lee

Korea International School

Abstract

This paper examines the 19th-century shifts in global power dynamics, focusing on China's decline and Japan's rise due to the imposition of unequal treaties by Western powers. It begins by exploring the Sinocentric order, where China, guided by Confucian principles and diplomatic dominance, was the center of Asia's political and economic landscape. The paper then delves into Western expansion during the Industrial Revolution, culminating in the

Opium Wars, which led to China's century of humiliation through treaties like the Treaty of Nanking. These treaties eroded China's sovereignty and reshaped its foreign relations. In contrast, Japan's Meiji Restoration propelled its rapid modernization and emergence as a major industrial and military power, using unequal treaties to gain international recognition. The paper concludes by reflecting on how China's initial humiliation evolved into strategic negotiation, influencing modern China's diplomatic strategies and altering the geopolitical landscape of Asia.

Introduction

The 19th century and its drastic changes unfolded as a transformative period in the global economy, characterized by the ascendancy of industrialization and the surge of international trade. While Europe and North America experienced a flourishing industrial revolution, Asia, with China at its center,

grappled with economic disparities, political instability, and resistance to foreign influence.¹

External pressures and conflicts between Western and Asian powers further complicated the economic landscape in the Asian region during the 19th century. The Opium Wars, which were conflicts between China and Britain over the British trade of opium in

exchange for Chinese goods, not only highlighted the clash between Western commercial interests and Chinese sovereignty but also resulted in the imposition of unequal treaties. These treaties would seal the destiny of East Asian countries for the next century. Within this context, the imposition of unequal treaties on Asian nations emerges as a major turning point, setting the stage for a deeper examination of the historical ramifications and the reshaping of global power dynamics.

The Sinocentric Order

The Sinocentric order stood as a central pillar of Asia's political and cultural landscape. Rooted in Confucian principles, China had long perceived itself as the civilizational center, radiating influence and setting the tone for the surrounding nations. The Confucian worldview, emphasizing hierarchy, social harmony, and deference to authority, played a pivotal role in shaping the region's political and economic dynamics. China gained this prominence through centuries of cultural, political, and military dominance, solidified by its early advancements in agriculture, technology, and governance, which positioned it as the most powerful and stable empire in East Asia.²

At the heart of the Sinocentric order was the tribute system, a diplomatic, cultural, and economic framework. Under this system, neighboring states recognized China's preeminence and paid tributes as a symbolic

acknowledgment of their subordinate status. The origins of this system can be traced back to the Han Dynasty, which first established these practices to assert Chinese dominance and facilitate controlled interactions with bordering states. The tribute system not only facilitated diplomatic relations but also served as an instrument for managing trade and cultural exchanges within the broader East Asian region.³

Confucianism, with its emphasis on moral governance and adherence to tradition, provided the ideological underpinning for the Sinocentric order. This philosophy reinforced the notion that Chinese civilization represented the pinnacle of cultural and moral achievement, which spread to other nations primarily through cultural diffusion, trade, and sometimes military influence, as neighboring states adopted Confucian ideals to align themselves with the dominant power of China, influencing neighboring societies to adopt similar values. The tributary system, therefore, operated not merely as a pragmatic diplomatic tool but also as a manifestation of Confucian ideals in international relations.⁴

Economic relations within the Sinocentric order were intricately woven into the fabric of the tribute system. While tributary states offered symbolic gifts to China, this exchange fostered a structured economic network. Chinese goods, such as silk, tea, and porcelain, held immense value, and tribute missions provided an avenue for neighboring states to

access these coveted commodities. In return, China reinforced the economic interdependence among participating nations, bolstering China's economic dominance and also contributing to the emergence of a regional trade network.⁵

A structured hierarchy marked the diplomatic interactions within the Sinocentric order. This hierarchical framework was, for example, evident in the relationship between China and Korea. Despite being a sovereign ruler, the Korean monarch participated in a diplomatic practice wherein tribute missions were sent to the Chinese emperor, symbolizing respect and acknowledgment of China's superior status and possibly as a strategic diplomatic policy to ensure peace and avoid conflict with a more powerful neighbor. In return, the Chinese emperor reciprocated by bestowing titles upon the Korean ruler and protection from threats. This reciprocal exchange not only strengthened China's central authority but also established a framework for upholding stability and order in the region.⁶

Western Economic Development and Clashes in China

Far away from the hierarchical order established by the Middle Kingdom, a term referring to China, based on the ancient belief that China was the center of civilization.

European countries started to loom over a growing number of territories. A confluence of economic motives and geopolitical ambitions

propelled Western expansionist policies during the 19th century. The Industrial Revolution in the West fueled a voracious appetite for resources and markets, prompting Western powers to seek new avenues for trade and expansion.⁷

The pursuit of such economic interests took place primarily through the establishment of trading posts in various parts of Asia. The race to trade with Asian countries became a defining feature of Western economic development during this period. Western nations, driven by competitive fervor, sought to establish trade networks and secure favorable economic arrangements with Asian counterparts. However, the uneven economic development in Asia created a power imbalance that Western powers were quick to exploit.⁸ These economic pursuits often collided with local interests, triggering local conflicts.⁹

China also participated in this trade network with various goods including tea, silk and porcelain, that were highly sought after by Western nations.¹⁰ However, European powers began to seek exclusive trading rights over these commodities, leading to an inevitable competition between the Western powers over their economic presence in Asia.

After the colonization of India, the British sought an economic advantage over their trade with China. Based on the significantly increasing power and influence of the British East India Company in Asia, the British would

soon take advantage of the internal political struggles of China and claim a monopoly on the Asian trade network.¹¹

China's traditional stance of self-sufficiency and limited interest in foreign trade created a trade imbalance. This, coupled with internal factors including the corruption within the Qing dynasty, peasant uprisings, and the rigid social structure that hindered reforms, and resistance to foreign influence contributed to significant economic decline in China throughout the 19th century. Chinese official Lin, an imperial envoy, vehemently protested the exploitative nature of Western powers flooding China with opium: "But how happens it on the contrary, that ye take your uneatable opium and bring it to our central land, chousing people out of their substance, and involving their very lives in destruction?"¹²

This development culminated in the Opium War, further dismantling the centuries-old Sinocentric order in the face of Western expansionist policies. The Opium Wars, sparked by the British East India Company's opium trade with China, exemplified the violent clash between Western economic interests and China's sovereignty and the disruptive impact of international trade on the Chinese economy. The resultant military conflicts and China's forced concessions in the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 marked the beginning of a series of treaties that would later be coined Unequal Treaties.

The Introduction of Unequal Treaties

The aftermath of the Opium War stands as a milestone, marking the beginning of an era where Western powers wielded significant influence over Asian economies.¹³ Western nations, particularly the British, consolidated their economic influence through these treaties, impacting the sovereignty and economic autonomy of Asian nations.¹⁴

The unequal treaties extracted concessions from China, opening ports and facilitating foreign control over trade and economic policies. The Treaty of Nanking, signed in 1842, reflected the coercive power of Western nations and their ability to reshape the economic landscape of Asian countries.

Article 10, reads as follows,

His Majesty the Emperor of China agrees to establish at all the Ports which are by the 2nd Article of this Treaty to be thrown open for the resort of British Merchants, a fair and regular Tariff of Export and Import Customs and other Dues, which Tariff shall be publicly notified and promulgated for general information[...].¹⁵

The Treaty of Nanking compelled China to cede the economically vital territory of Hong Kong to Great Britain. Additionally, Article 10 granted Britain preferential trade conditions, forcing China to establish a tariff system at the open ports that benefited British merchants, further underscoring the unequal economic terms imposed on China by the treaty.

This treaty marked the initiation of a series of agreements that heavily favored Western interests, allowing them to exploit Asian markets and resources. Such exploitative sentiments that even expanded outside the occupation of Hong Kong are depicted in a letter written by R. M. Martin, the British colonial treasurer, to C. E. Trevelyan, the assistant secretary to the lord's commissioners of Her Majesty's treasury.

The position which England has assumed, the treaty which she has forced on China, (which has thus been opened to all Europe and America), [...] may end in the dismemberment, if not destruction, of the Tartar empire of China.¹⁶

The supplementary article 13 of the Treaty of the Bogue (1843) enforces extraterritoriality by allowing foreign citizens to be judged by the law of their own country, not by the Chinese laws.

Regarding the punishment of English criminals, the English Government will enact the laws necessary to attain that end, and the Consul will be empowered to put them in force; and regarding the punishment of Chinese criminals, these will be tried and punished by their own laws, [...].¹⁷

Following the signing of the Treaty of the Bogue, other Western nations sought similar concessions from the Qing Emperor, marking a troubling erosion of China's sovereignty on its own soil. The Treaty of Wanghia of 1844, negotiated with the United States the year after

the British treaties, exemplified this trend. Article XXI of the Treaty explicitly granted extraterritorial rights, allowing American citizens who committed crimes in China to be exclusively tried and punished according to U.S. laws.¹⁸¹⁹²⁰ Similarly, the Sino-French Treaty of Whampoa of 1844, negotiated shortly afterward, further exemplified the imposition of extraterritoriality.²¹ Described as 'the most carefully drawn of all treaties', this agreement solidified the undermining of Chinese sovereignty as Western powers continued to exploit the unequal treaty system.²²²³

On the economic side, Article 8 of the Treaty of the Bogue further establishes the principle of most-favored-nation:

[...], additional privileges or immunities to any of the subjects or Citizens of such Foreign Countries, the same privileges and immunities will be extended to and enjoyed by British Subjects [...]."²⁴

The provision emphasizes equal treatment, ensuring that any additional privileges or immunities granted to other foreign nations will automatically be conferred upon British subjects without the need for separate negotiations. This clause reflects the concept of most-favored-nation status, aiming to prevent discriminatory practices and promote equal economic opportunities for all treaty-signing nations in their interactions with China.

The consequences of these unequal treaties were profound and enduring. They not only altered the economic dynamics but also laid the groundwork

for subsequent geopolitical shifts in the region. Western powers capitalized on the favorable terms of these treaties to strengthen their economic foothold in Asia, leading to a period where Western nations held significant sway over Asian nations.

Consequences of the Unequal Treaties

The aftermath of the Opium War in 1839-42 brought forth immediate economic consequences for both China and Western nations. The economic consequences of the Opium War were substantial and extended beyond the ports of China, shaping the overall trajectory of China's economic landscape in the following years, such as the opening of new ports to foreign trade, the cession of Hong Kong to Britain, and the imposition of low tariffs on imported goods in the 1840s and 1850s.²⁵ The unequal treaties signed during this period resulted in a significant influx of international goods, foreign firms, and advanced technologies into China. The economic impact was not confined to treaty ports alone, as regions with greater Western influence experienced accelerated growth of industrial firms and increased investment in advanced machinery and steam engines.²⁶ The unequal treaties acted as catalysts, channeling Western influence into China's economic development and challenging the notion that the Opium War only favored Western nations.

The unequal treaties not only transformed China's economic structure but also had

immediate political ramifications. The introduction of consular courts and trade institutions through these treaties altered the legal landscape. While legal influence had a strong but geographically limited impact, trade influence penetrated deeper into China, reaching areas away from the ports. This legal and trade influence weakened the Qing state's coercive power to control protests, potentially contributing to social unrest and encouraging banditry.²⁷ The intervention by Western powers further exacerbated existing challenges faced by the Qing, raising questions about the net impact of colonial interventions on different forms of state capacities.

Japan following the steps of Western powers

The Meiji Restoration of 1868, a political revolution that restored imperial rule under Emperor Meiji, leading to rapid modernization and industrialization of Japan, propelled Japan into a major industrial and military power by the early 20th century.²⁸ Japan emerged as an exception, rapidly modernizing its economy with exports growing at an astonishing rate of 7.4% per annum between 1883 and 1913, surpassing the pace of world trade.²⁹

Japan's experience with unequal treaties in the mid-19th century not only shaped its domestic reforms but also influenced its subsequent actions toward China and Korea. The Harris Treaty signed in 1858 is a condensed of what China endured a few years ago, i.e., extraterritoriality and unfair commercial

practices.³⁰ Having felt the weight of extraterritoriality and the demands for proof of civilization, Meiji Japan's leaders saw the imposition of unequal treaties as a tool for achieving international recognition.³¹ With the goal of shedding the inferior status assigned by the imperialist world order, Japan sought to emulate Western powers not only in terms of industrialization but also in projecting influence beyond its borders.

This transformation had direct implications for Japan's interactions with China and Korea. The closing ring of European empires around possible Japanese expansion points in Asia prompted Japanese leaders to pursue a new, European-style empire on the edge of the continent.³² In this pursuit, Japan's imperialistic ambitions manifested in actions that mirrored the tactics employed against them by Western powers. The unequal treaties Japan forced upon China and Korea were not merely instruments of economic exploitation but also tools of geopolitical dominance. Japan leveraged its military strength and modernized institutions to impose its will on its neighbors, creating a hierarchical relationship where Japan assumed the role of the dominant power, leaving an indelible mark on East Asian geopolitics in the early 20th century.³³

China's century of humiliation

Initially, the Chinese had limited awareness of the long-term consequences of the unequal treaty system, which reshaped the dynamics of

the once self-reliant Qing dynasty's foreign relations. During the 1870s, a palpable sense of humiliation and inferiority emerged among Chinese intellectuals and diplomatic officials, reflecting on the perceived injustice embedded in the treaties.³⁴ Figures like Guo Songtao and Zeng Jize, Qing diplomatic officials, emphasized the need for equality in China's interactions with the West. The notion of extraterritoriality gained prominence, with Wang Tao, a Chinese political columnist, coining the term in the Chinese language in 1883, arguing for the elimination of consular jurisdiction in alignment with Western laws. This focus on extraterritoriality, while also a form of early nationalism and resistance, was utterly humiliating for China as it highlighted China's loss of sovereignty and the need to appeal to Western concepts of law and justice to reclaim a position of equality. It was a stark acknowledgment of the nation's diminished status in the global order, forcing China to seek rectification within a framework imposed by foreign powers.³⁵

By the early 20th century, the discourse on unequal treaties evolved within the Beijing government's Foreign Ministry, now part of the First Republic. The officials inherited the imperial cooperative strategy and engaged in what came to be known as "the Unequal Treaties Learning."³⁶ The treaties were re-examined, emphasizing specific provisions and the circumstances of their signing. Despite the weakened bargaining position of the First

Republic, officials adeptly wielded the treaties to pressure foreign countries into fulfilling their obligations, creating room for negotiation and enabling a well-argued resistance to foreign demands.

Ironically, the very treaties that symbolized China's subjugation became tools for negotiation and resistance, contributing to the construction of modern China's diplomatic strategies. The historical journey from resentment over unequal treaties to strategic utilization depicts the complex dynamics that shaped China's emergence on the global stage after its age of humiliation through unequal treaties.

Conclusion

The clash of the Opium War in the mid-19th century was a culmination of Western countries' expansionist policies and economic rivalries. The Opium Wars were not only about the trade in opium but also emblematic of the broader struggle for economic dominance and the imposition of unequal treaties.³⁷ The treaties that followed, epitomized by the Treaty of Nanking, reflected the coercive power of Western nations and their ability to reshape the

economic landscape of Asian countries. In essence, the clash of the Opium War was a pivotal moment that marked the beginning of a series of unequal treaties, shaping the trajectory of economic relations between Western powers and Asia.

Appendix A



En Chine - Le Gateau des Rois... et des Empereurs Le Petit Journal, January 16, 1898.

Endnotes

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