

## THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA, 1784-1915

The relationship between the United States and the Far East is one of the most important and least understood of modern history. Asia has been an "also ran" in American policy, a mysterious land of very different people and an intriguing area for trade and travel. During the period of her formal relationship with the Far East, the United States has followed a foreign policy dictated primarily by Europe and European interests. Yet, on five occasions since 1898, American soldiers have fought in Asia while they have done so only twice in Europe. Asia's teeming millions represent the world's most problematic challenge for the future; there, a way of life opposed to that which we follow in the United States has its greatest potential. It is therefore important that we consider the early relationships between America and the Far East in order to establish a basis for later consideration of this vital area. The subject will be dealt with in two parts. One will concern the United States and China; the other, the United States and Japan. Both of these articles will briefly trace the relationship to the start of World War I.

China was the greatest culture, and quite probably the most powerful nation, in the world for far longer than any other civilization. She assumed this position at least 200 years before the birth of Christ, probably earlier, and held it with few interruptions until the late 17th century and possibly 100 years longer. It is important to realize this fact because herein lies the basis for the continual problems that have beset China since the Opium War (1839) and which have made her basically unable to respond dynamically and realistically to the West to the present day. China saw herself as the "Middle Kingdom," the center of the world; everyone else in the entire world was inferior. The only historic reason that any power came to China was to pay tribute to her, and thus it was that the West was beset with tremendous problems when it tried to establish an equal and viable trade relationship with this Middle Kingdom.

No one knows when the first European went to China, but of the earlier visitors, the name Marco Polo is familiar. Certainly as early as the 10th century there was a dynamic trade between the Arabs and Chinese. It was not until 1514, however, that the first all-water route was opened to China by the Portuguese who made permanent their establishment with the founding of Macao in 1557. Religion too, came with these Europeans and in 1582 an Italian Jesuit, Matteo Ricci, arrived in Macao and began successfully converting relatively upper-class Chinese. As time went on however, the Chinese developed an antagonism to Christianity and in 1724 it was proscribed in China.<sup>1</sup>

The second European nation to come to China for trade was Holland. The Dutch attempted to begin trading activities as early as 1604, but the Chinese refused to admit them to regular trade at Canton until 1729. The British also came upon the scene early, with the arrival of their first trading mission in 1637, and they were trading regularly at Canton by 1699. The other European nations played an inconspicuous role in the early China trade although by 1750 ships from most of them could be seen at Canton.<sup>2</sup>

In order to understand the evolution of this commercial interest, it is necessary to briefly describe the trading arrangement established by the Chinese to control these foreign barbarians. Trade was confined to the South China port of Canton. Here, in order for a European nation to establish trade, it was necessary for it to deal with one small group of Chinese merchants, called the co-hong. These men determined who would trade, what and how much would be available, and what tariff duties would be applied. It was, in reality, a monopoly. It was this one-sided system that helped antagonize the Europeans and laid the groundwork for the sorry fate of China in the latter 19th century and beyond.

From 1750 until 1834, China's relations with Europe were dominated by England. The British were very content with the trade situation at

Canton, because they had found the key ingredient for a profitable and successful operation - opium. Because this drug had a huge demand in China and because the British could easily grow it in India, the trade boomed. The desirability of this trade relationship was one-sided, however, for it presented the Chinese government with a dual problem. First, opium usage represented a major social evil; and second, efforts to stamp out the trade became a key test of the Chinese ability to control foreign ingress. Thus in 1839 the Emperor ordered his agents in Canton to stop the flow of this vile weed. The result was the Opium War which the British easily won. The Treaty of Nanking which followed, was concluded in 1842 and began the further opening of China.

Although the association and trade between the United States and China did not reach great proportions until after the Opium War, Americans were on the scene well before 1842. In 1784, one year after the United States became an independent nation, the Empress of China, a tiny ship of 300 tons, began the first American trade expedition to China. The profit from the fifteen month voyage was only 25 percent but that was sufficient to launch a booming trade. In 1801, thirty-four American ships traded at Canton and during the period between 1784 and 1811, Americans were the most serious rival the British had for the Cantonese tea trade. The volume of trading continued to grow until the period after 1844 when the Yankee clipper ship dominated the China trade.

In addition to trade, religion was a vital force in American activity in China. The vices of the "heathen" Chinese shocked Americans and helped steel them in their idea that an unlimited program of Christianizing could be undertaken in China. Throughout the period of Chinese-American relations until 1949, these missionary groups were a vital and significant force in opinion making and policy formulation vis-à-vis China.

Although trade had been increasing with the Orient for a number of years, it was not until after the Opium War that American popular interest

in China started to expand. That conflict stimulated the anti-British bias of Americans and evoked sympathy for the Chinese, a feeling that remained part of American policy for a century. This sympathy was not great enough to prevent Americans from insisting on the same trade and diplomatic privileges that Britain had obtained from the Opium War. American policy was actually to remain friendly with the Chinese, condemn the war-like activities of the British, but take advantage of anything the English were able to wrest from China.

The official American policy toward China, which survived for a century, was set down by President Tyler in 1842. The President asked Congress to authorize the appointment of a resident commissioner in China to protect the commercial and diplomatic affairs of the United States. The first of these commissioners was the brilliant and able Caleb Cushing, appointed in 1843. The Cushing mission arrived at Macao in 1844 armed with a letter from President Tyler to the Chinese Emperor. This unique document read, in part:

I hope your health is good. China is a Great Empire, extending over a great part of the world. The Chinese are numerous. You have millions and millions of subjects. The Twenty-Six United States are as large as China, though our People are not so numerous. The rising Sun looks upon the great mountains and great rivers of China. When he sets, he looks upon rivers and mountains equally large, in the United States. Our territories extend from one great ocean to the other.<sup>3</sup>

Cushing soon started to negotiate for a treaty between the United States and China. The Chinese were basically reluctant and it was not until the American commissioner threatened to go to Peking that the Chinese decided to sign a pact. The result was the first treaty negotiated specifically with the United States; the Treaty of Wang-hsia. This pact succeeded in putting the concessions granted to foreigners in writing, secured most-favored-nation status, and established extraterritoriality for Americans in China.

The provisions of the earlier treaty of Nanking and that of Wang-hsia were repeatedly violated by the Chinese. Whether this was intentional or whether the

Chinese did not really understand their commitments is hard to determine, but probably elements of both were involved. The indignities suffered by foreigners were further compounded by the inability of the Chinese to keep internal order themselves. This problem came to a head in the 1850's with a huge civil war called the Taiping Rebellion. External pressure, specifically from Britain and France, further complicated the situation. In 1856 these two European nations determined to put pressure on China for additional concessions because of several affronts to their citizens by the Chinese. The result was another war which was ended in 1858 with the Treaty of Tientsin. This pact gave the Western nations the right to maintain a resident minister in Peking and to travel in all parts of the interior of China, provided for the opening of additional ports to trade, and guaranteed protection for Christian missionaries by Chinese officials. These advantages applied to Britain, France, the United States and Russia - the first two as a result of force and the latter duo by most-favored-nation treatment.

The conclusion of the articles at Tientsin did not prove to be the beginning of a peaceful era, however. One provision for putting the treaties into force was that copies would be exchanged by the Western powers and Chinese at Peking. The Chinese now balked at this provision and said that the representatives of the Western powers could not proceed to the sacred capital. The situation produced another conflict and once again the Chinese were at the mercy of the foreign allies. The result was the Peking Convention of 1860 which put the items of the Tientsin pact into operation and extracted further concessions from China. Thus it was that after 1860 China was open to the West, and exploitation on a grand scale began.

The American representative in China during the decade following the negotiations was a truly remarkable man, Anson Burlingame. He was appointed to his position by President Lincoln as a reward for services during the 1860 campaign. The dynamic Mr. Burlingame soon emerged as a leading force among Chinese diplomatic circles and was successful in tempering relations between the various powers and the Chinese. The major contribution

of Burlingame was his ability to convince the Chinese that they should undertake sending diplomatic representatives abroad. The upshot of this policy appeared in 1867 when he was asked by the Chinese government to lead a mission to the major powers having relations with China. The first stop of this mission was the United States, where the group was received with enthusiasm. In America, Burlingame described the Chinese as standing with arms extended to receive "the shining banners of Western civilization." Most Americans took him literally and his words laid the foundation for an erroneous assumption of Chinese objectives that has deceived Americans to the present day. While in America, Burlingame succeeded in getting eight supplementary articles to the Treaty of Tientsin agreed upon. These related to consuls, commerce, residence and travel. From Washington the Burlingame mission went on to England and several other nations, trying to get other treaty revisions. In Russia, in 1870, Burlingame died of pneumonia, bringing to an end his able diplomatic career.

While the foundations of American policy in China were being laid, American domestic policy toward the Chinese was also being hammered out. The initial key to the immigration of Chinese into the United States was the demand for cheap labor, especially on the construction of the railroad from the West Coast. The flow soon became self-sustaining, however, as the Chinese immigrant found a personal and economic freedom which he had not experienced in China. So rapid in fact was the movement of Chinese into California, the main center of their immigration, that by 1880 there were 75,000 living there, a total of about 9 percent of the population. At first these Orientals were welcomed because cheap labor was not only hard to find on the railroad but also in the gold fields and in the cities.

Although the Chinese were victims of discrimination from the first, this problem did not become large until the depression of the 1870's. When times got hard, praise for the Oriental virtues of industry and docility turned to objections to this thrift and industry. His seeming ability to exist off a little rice, his habits of living in separate areas of towns, his gambling and other so-called "vices" made him a convenient scapegoat for a financial situation that Californians

could not understand. The center of the ensuing violence was San Francisco where Chinese were mobbed, stoned, and subjected to other indignities. Bret Harte wrote of Wan Lee, who had met such a fate.

Dead, my reverend friends, dead. Stoned to death in the streets of San Francisco, in the year of grace 1869 by a mob of half-grown boys and Christian school children.<sup>4</sup>

The social problem soon became a political one on the Pacific Coast. Congressmen from that area began to demand some measure to rid the nation of these evil, heathen Orientals. While the Eastern portion of the country remained basically indifferent, the West clamored for action. No measures could be taken, however, until the Burlingame Treaty of 1868 was revised, for that pact guaranteed the Chinese the right of unrestricted entry into the United States. In 1879 Congress attempted to bypass this problem by enacting a law which prohibited any ship from bringing more than 15 Chinese to America in any one trip. It was vetoed by President Hayes.

Another step toward solving the problem was taken the following year when a commission went to China to secure revision of the Burlingame pact. The group succeeded in drawing up an agreement which gave the United States the right to "regulate, limit, or suspend" but not "absolutely prohibit" the immigration of Chinese laborers. Congress responded by suspending Chinese immigration for 25 years, whereupon President Arthur vetoed the bill. A compromise was reached in 1882 which suspended immigration of Chinese laborers for ten years. This law was the first American measure to limit immigration into the United States and was later to apply to the Japanese as well. By a further revision and strengthening of the basic act of 1882, the Chinese were continuously kept out of the country. Chinese exclusion had become one of the nation's firm policies.

Even with exclusion, the outbursts against the Chinese continued. These ranged over the West, with a particularly ugly one occurring at Rock Springs, Wyoming in 1885. When order was restored, 28 Chinese lay dead and 15 more

wounded. The same theme ran through all these outbursts - the cheap labor Chinese driving the white man out of work. These atrocities toward the Chinese immigrant or native-born Chinese-American is indeed a black page in American history.<sup>5</sup>

In order to fully understand the next chapter in Chinese-American relations, it is necessary to look briefly at China's domestic development during the years that followed the Convention of Peking in 1860. Initially, it must be remembered that China was going through a period of internal chaos. The Taiping Rebellion had left the dynasty of the Manchus in serious trouble. They had, in fact, been unable to put down the rebellion for almost 15 years. This internal situation was only compounded by the problem of trying to deal with a more demanding and powerful West. As can be seen in the companion article, Japan was able to successfully respond, but China was not.

As was mentioned earlier, China had for centuries considered herself to be the "Middle Kingdom" - the center of the world. She was thus culturally unprepared, in the first place, to accept a more powerful West. In addition, most of the Chinese in high places were there by virtue of the traditional Confucian system. This system, they believed, would be seriously undermined if China became Western. Thus it was that Chinese efforts to respond to the foreign impact revolved around the concept of modified restoration of the old order, not revolution. Several prominent Chinese stepped forward to try and lead reform by starting new industries, sending students abroad, getting government backing for new military developments and encouraging new schools with some Western learning, to mention only a few. These efforts were all doomed to failure, however, because the ruling class and the bureaucracy, tied rigidly to the past and the myth that China's philosophical superiority could eventually overcome the West, refused to alter their path in order to cope with the inevitable.<sup>6</sup>

As the 19th century drew to a close, the most critical events in the relationship between China and the United States occurred in the Far East.

For centuries China had exercised control over Korea and her foreign relations. Chinese control had not been seriously contested by the West, rather it was Japan that brought crisis to the relationship. In 1876 the Japanese had succeeded in securing a treaty with Korea which opened three ports to Japanese trade. China realized that there was a distinct possibility she could lose control of Korea and thus she adopted a policy of strengthening Korean military forces and making her diplomatic ties with Korea stronger while urging Korea to conclude treaties with such powers as the United States, Great Britain and France in an effort to counterbalance the Japanese threat.

This policy was not given time to work effectively, however, for in 1882 an explosive internal power struggle led both China and Japan to intervene on opposite sides. War was avoided but both sides greatly increased their commitment in Korea and their stake in her future. The outgrowth of this explosive situation was the Tientsin Convention of 1885 under which both China and Japan agreed to withdraw their forces from Korea and notify the other before sending troops into the country. The stage was thus set for the Sino-Japanese War. In 1894, an internal rebellion of a Korean religious sect broke out and when both China and Japan sent troops, the war was on.

The conflict was fairly one-sided and by 1895 the Chinese were ready to sign a humiliating peace. By the Treaty of Shimonoseki, Japan entered the realm of the great powers and China was reduced to the status of a country unable to defend itself and open for partition by the foreign powers. Spheres of influence had long been present in China, but now it appeared that the scramble to actually dismember the country was underway. It was under these conditions that the United States, now an Asian power with the acquisition of the Philippines, issued the first Open Door note, in 1899.<sup>7</sup>

The objective of Secretary of State Hay's message was the maintenance of the basic privileges of one power within the sphere of another. The note, which was not formally agreed to by the powers to which it was addressed,

stated that no power would interfere with the administration of the treaty ports or with the collection of Chinese customs, and that no discriminatory harbor dues or railroad rates would be charged. It can safely be said that the first of Hay's notes neither saved China nor significantly affected the policy of any power in China. It did, however, give birth to the myth of United States' protection of Chinese rights which has lived in American lore ever since.

Events in China rapidly expanded the interest of America and the rest of the world in 1900. Internal pressure on the ruling Manchu dynasty and events in the countryside together gave rise to a mysterious quasi-religious society called "Righteous Harmony of Fists" or Boxers. This group, whose numbers grew rapidly in late 1899, came into the open in early 1900 with the cry of "sha!" "sha!" (kill! kill!) and directed its action against Western influence. Foreigners and Chinese Christians were soon in great danger. On June 20, the government declared war on the foreign powers and laid siege to their legations in Peking. The West responded by forming an 18,000 man international rescue team which fought its way to Peking in August 1900 and relieved the legations. The Americans contributed 2500 troops to this force.<sup>8</sup>

China, it seemed, was now near disintegration. Russia occupied the three Northeast Provinces, other forces were to be seen in almost any large city in China and the Manchu government was ineffective. Secretary Hay, concerned about his newly stated Open Door policy, decided he should issue a second note to clarify the American position. The upshot was the second Open Door note, issued on July 3, 1900. This communication stated that:

the policy of the Government of the United States is to seek a solution which may bring about permanent safety and peace to China, preserve Chinese territorial and administrative entity, protect all rights guaranteed to friendly powers by treaty and international law, and safeguard for the world the principle of equal and impartial trade with all parts of the Chinese empire.<sup>9</sup>

The powers were not asked to answer to this second note but it did have some impact on them. While international rivalry and suspicion were probably

the key items in preserving Chinese integrity, the Hay policy probably tempered allied feelings to the degree necessary to preclude exorbitant demands by the powers on the prostrate Middle Kingdom. The Chinese were forced to pay an indemnity of which the United States got \$25 million. America subsequently furthered its friendly relations with China by remitting this money to the Chinese who used a portion of it to educate their students in the United States.

The period between the Boxer Rebellion and the coming of World War I is one which must be approached from two sides; the internal Chinese situation and the international posture of the Middle Kingdom. Domestically, China was characterized by both chaos and efforts to reform. Diplomatically, exploitation and humiliation prevailed.

Following the end of the Boxer episode, considerable internal pressure was evident among enlightened officials, to reform China before it was too late. In areas such as education, the military, and economics there were distinct efforts to adapt to the West and to modernize. As before, these moves were opposed by many high officials and those measures that were adopted were generally half-hearted. Among the key problems that had to be faced and which seriously affected reform efforts, were the great departure from the past represented by these changes, the lack of effective control by the central government over much of the country, and the lack of sufficient finances to bring about many changes.

The most radical departure from the established system came in the area of governmental reform. Following the Boxer episode there was a great deal of pressure exerted to change the Chinese form of government to something more Western, possibly to some form of constitutional system. Japan provided a very impressive example for many Chinese. Thus it was that in 1905 the Chinese followed an earlier Japanese example and sent a commission to Europe and the United States to study constitutional government. They believed that a constitutional monarchy was possible without sacrificing the

power and authority of the Imperial institution. As a result, such a governmental form was recommended in 1907 and specific steps were taken to implement these concepts in 1908. Provincial assemblies met for the first time in 1909 and the first national assembly convened in 1910. Reform was still far from what many people desired; however, especially so to a young doctor named Sun Yat-sen. He and others believed a complete republican form of government was needed and they were able to precipitate a revolution on October 10, 1911, which eventually forced the Emperor to abdicate, ended the Imperial Dynasty, and implemented a republic under an ex-warlord named Yuan Shih-kai.

This government, too, was short-lived. After taking power by being elected Premier in 1911, Yuan proceeded to remove Sun Yat-sen from any authority. Yuan won election to the presidency in 1912 and in 1913 he became in fact a dictator. Two years later he proclaimed a governmental change to a constitutional monarchy and declared himself the new Emperor. Revolt followed and Yuan died in 1916 leaving the country in chaos, ruled by various regional warlords. China was to remain in this state, for all practical purposes, until the rise of Chiang Kai-shek in 1927.

On the diplomatic front, significant events also occurred which would have been a challenge to even a strong government. In 1904 the Russo-Japanese War broke out. The main issue in this conflict was control of Chinese-owned Manchuria. The conflict ended in 1905 after mediation by President Theodore Roosevelt who was motivated, at least initially, by a desire to maintain the Open Door policy. Although his efforts were successful on paper, in fact China lost effective control over Manchuria, and Japanese inroads into China were greatly increased.

Following the settlement of Japanese demands in 1905, China was confronted by an international rush to build railroads and increase spheres of influence in several portions of the country. China seemed ready to cooperate with this effort, however, for she lacked the basic resources to

build her own rail net and realized that a modern transportation system was vital to any advancement. Most of the major Western nations were quick to invest in these internal improvement projects.

The United States became involved in this situation through the efforts of two men, Willard Straight and E. H. Harriman. The former was the American Consul General in Mukden from 1906 to 1908. He believed that the only way for the United States to maintain the Open Door was to become involved in such matters as railroad construction with the rest of the Western powers. The second man, Harriman, was a railroad tycoon in the United States and had visions of constructing a round-the-world transportation system, part of which would pass through Manchuria. These two men were able to put enough pressure on Secretary of State Knox and President Taft to win approval for the entry of a group of American bankers into a consortium to develop Manchurian railroads. The Americans were actually involved in very little building and the policy ended in 1913 when President Wilson withdrew Administration support from the venture. This action by the American bankers and Secretary Knox, actually backfired in that it drew Japan and Russia closer together in their efforts to keep other powers out of Manchuria. (This is discussed in greater detail in the paper dealing with the United States and Japan).

Directly connected with railroad expansion into China was the evolution of the Open Door from its initial pronouncement until 1910. Three phases seem evident. The first period was designed to preserve equal commercial opportunity in spheres of influence. In the second phase, Elihu Root (Secy of State under TR) struggled to keep the concept alive in the face of increasing spheres of influence. The third period was that of dollar diplomacy under Knox (Secy of State under Taft) which was characterized by emphasis on equal investment as well as commercial opportunity.<sup>10</sup> It was quite evident that the Open Door followed American objectives fairly closely.

The outbreak of World War I wrote another unfortunate page to the book of Chinese history in the modern world. China was at first concerned that she might be involved in the war and so appealed to the United States to use her influence to have China's neutrality maintained. America was willing only to appeal to the belligerents, an action which was basically ignored. Japan's early entry into the war justifiably concerned China. The Japanese proceeded to take over the German interests in China, particularly on the Shantung Peninsula. In addition, Japanese ships operated freely in Chinese waters. The crowning blow to Peking, however, was the Japanese issuance of its "twenty-one demands" on China. If accepted, these proposals would have made China a virtual Japanese protectorate. The Chinese once again appealed to the United States to use her influence in the situation. The indignation of Americans over the demands caused Japan to withdraw some of the more objectionable ones, but significant inroads on Chinese sovereignty were still scored. Secretary of State Bryan also notified Japan that the United States would recognize no reduction of American rights in China or the impairment of the Open Door. He did, however, admit that special interests existed between China and Japan due to their territorial propinquity. This situation was to raise its head again at the Versailles Conference when China became a pawn with which to placate the Japanese.

What has been briefly covered in these pages is a history of the relations between China, an ancient giant, and the United States, an emerging world power. This is one of the very significant relationships in modern history. Out of it came a volume of myth that has played a truly gigantic role in the history of the Far East since 1949. America found China a confused, frustrated and weak nation. She befriended this ancient kingdom but did very little to help her emerge successfully into the modern world. As little help as the Americans gave, however, was indeed more than that given by any other power.

The pages of Chinese-American relations are also filled with misunderstanding, friction and frustration. It is doubtful if America ever really understood China or vice-versa. It is probably because of this effort to befriend without knowing how, the urge to protect but without risk, and to

aid but only half-heartedly that led to the eventual troubled Chinese-American relationship that exists today.

The United States never fought a real war against China and counted her as the principal American friend in Asia; yet China turned her back on the United States in 1949. In the companion paper we examine the relations of the United States and Japan, two nations with a very troubled relationship that emerged as friends.

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- <sup>1</sup> See Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of Christian Missions in China (New York, 1932).
  - <sup>2</sup> For a complete coverage of the China trade see John K. Fairbank, Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast (2 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1953).
  - <sup>3</sup> Hunter Miller, ed., Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America (Washington, 1934), IV, 661.
  - <sup>4</sup> L. L. Hazard, The Frontier in American Literature (New York, 1927), p. 197.
  - <sup>5</sup> For a complete coverage of this chapter in American history see M. R. Coolidge, Chinese Immigration (New York, 1909). E. C. Sandmeyer, The Anti-Chinese Movement in California (Urbana, Ill., 1939).
  - <sup>6</sup> See Teng Suu-yu and John K. Fairbank, China's Response to the West (Cambridge, Mass., 1954). Also Mary C. Wright, The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism (Stanford, 1957).
  - <sup>7</sup> For a complete discussion of the Open Door notes and associated diplomacy see A. Whitney Griswald, The Far Eastern Policy of the United States (New York, 1938).
  - <sup>8</sup> See Chester C. Tan, The Boxer Catastrophe (New York, 1955).
  - <sup>9</sup> Griswald, op. cit., pp. 501-502.
  - <sup>10</sup> Paul H. Clyde and Burton F. Beers, The Far East (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1966). Also see Raymond A. Esthus, "The Changing Concept of the Open Door, 1899-1910." The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XLVI (1949).