

## UNFINISHED BUSINESS: EAST ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST 1880–1914

By the 1880s, Europeans and Americans had been probing the commercial promise of East Asia for more than a century. They had pushed commercial bridgeheads (the ‘treaty ports’) into China and Japan, and subjected both countries to ‘unequal treaties’ that gave extraterritorial privileges to foreign residents and property. They had enforced a low-tariff regime in the interests of their trade. They had fought two wars against China to assert these rights and extend them more widely. They had forced the Ch’ing emperor to admit the diplomatic equality of the Western states and adopt (in 1876) the European practice of resident ambassadors.<sup>108</sup> But in 1880, despite the scale of the foreign presence, they were far from imposing on China as a whole (let alone on Japan) the kind of colonial subjection – or even semi-colonial dominance – that was fast becoming the rule elsewhere in Afro-Asia.

One reason for this was that East Asia was still comparatively remote from Europe, and the volume of trade between the two regions was considerably less than that between Europe and India (not to mention the Americas). But the Europeans’ caution also reflected China’s huge residual strength as a unified culture and a working political system. The adventurers and filibusters who shot their way into Africa, and carved out private empires with a handful of mercenaries, would have had short shrift in China. The cultural and political fragmentation that made it so easy for European intruders to pick up local allies in Africa had no counterpart here. There was a similar pattern on the commercial front. European merchants in their treaty-port godowns were in no position to control internal trade. They faced a highly organized commercial life, entrenched behind the barriers of language and China’s complicated currency. They were forced by necessity to deal through the large Chinese merchants, who acted as ‘compradors’ (go-betweens) for the Western firms.<sup>109</sup> As late as 1893, this commercial relationship could still be portrayed on the Chinese side

as one of mutual benefit, not foreign exploitation.<sup>110</sup> For all its travails in the middle years of the century, the imperial political structure was still in operation under the reformist rule of Li Hung-chang, the most powerful official for most of the period between 1870 and 1900. The ethnic consciousness of the Han majority had yet to be roused fully against the Manchu ruling caste who manned the inner citadel of the Ch'ing regime.<sup>111</sup> Not least, perhaps, the Ch'ing imperial government, with its tradition of parsimony, had studiously avoided incurring foreign debts, the Trojan Horse of outside interference. By the conciliatory treatment of the foreign enclaves and interests – and allowing expatriate management (under Chinese authority) in the sensitive sphere of maritime customs – Peking hoped to forestall a violent confrontation while China 'self-strengthened'.

Yet Manchu prestige and the stability of Ch'ing rule also depended upon China's central place in the East Asian 'world order'. The Ch'ing's greatest achievement had been to attach the vast Inner Asian hinterland of Tibet, Sinkiang, Mongolia and Manchuria to the East Asian heartland of China proper. Foreign penetration of this imperial periphery threatened to unravel this far-flung network of power. In the 1880s the Europeans chipped away. The Russians pressed forward from Central Asia. The British conquered upper Burma. France forced Peking to abandon its claim to the suzerainty of Annam (much of modern Vietnam). But it was the fate of Korea that brought on the crisis. Korea was vulnerable to external pressure from Russia (which envied its ice-free ports) and Japan. Its Confucian polity had been badly shaken by domestic opponents, some of them Christians. Yet the Peking court could not run the risk that Korea might lean towards another power and cut its long-standing ties with China. The 'hermit kingdom' was the maritime gateway into Inner Asia. It was the springboard for advance into the empty space of Manchuria. Its loss might destabilize much of China's steppe diplomacy, turning Inner Asia into a hostile borderland. So when a Japanese-backed coup overthrew Korea's sinophile regime in 1894, Peking refused to back down. But, in the

short war that followed between July 1894 and March 1895, it was China that suffered a humiliating defeat.

The Treaty of Shimonoseki (in April 1895) unleashed a whirlwind of change. It forced China to recognize the independence of Korea. Part of Manchuria was to be transferred to Japan, as well as Taiwan and the Pescadore islands. China had to pay a huge financial indemnity, equal to a year's worth of its public revenue. Among China's literate class – the provincial scholar-gentry on whose loyalty it depended – the Ch'ing dynasty suffered a devastating loss of prestige. To make matters worse, the imperial government was now forced to borrow abroad to help pay the indemnity and recoup its shattered military strength. Among the European powers, already alarmed by symptoms of impending collapse, this set off a race to lend China money, secured against the collateral of territorial and commercial rights. Russia led the way with a loan in return for Peking's permission to build a railway across Manchuria to its new eastern city at Vladivostok, along with an eighty-year lease to exploit the economic resources found along the line.<sup>112</sup> In 1898 Germany, Russia and Britain each acquired a naval base in North China near the maritime approach to Peking. The great powers made agreements among themselves on the zones where they would have preference in the concessions for railways that the Ch'ing government now seemed poised to grant. In this feverish climate, the imperial court suddenly announced a long list of decrees to reform education, the army and the bureaucratic system along lines broadly similar to Meiji Japan. Before they could be implemented, the emperor's mother, the notorious dowager empress (Tz'u-hsi), staged a *coup d'état* and dismissed the reformers. Into the bitter atmosphere of political conflict burst the violent disorders aimed against Christian conversions in north-east China, the Boxer Rebellion of 1898–1900. With the complicity of the court, the Boxers (literally the 'Fists of Righteous Harmony', a fiercely anti-Christian movement) and their sympathizers occupied Peking, cut off the city, and besieged the foreign legations. If the aim was to enlist xenophobic mass feeling in defence of the dynasty (the Boxer

slogan was ‘Support the Ch’ing, exterminate the foreigner’), it backfired spectacularly. The foreign powers (the Europeans, Americans and Japanese) sent a large armed force (45,000 men) to rescue their diplomats and punish the Boxers. It seemed that China’s rulers had blundered willy-nilly into an armed confrontation with the rest of the world.

The outcome inevitably was further humiliation. The dowager empress and her court fled the city. Another huge indemnity was imposed upon China. Under the terms of the Boxer settlement, the Chinese government was also forced to agree tariff reforms that would favour foreign trade. Browbeaten by the ‘diplomatic body’ – the collective weight of the foreign ambassadors – it seemed almost certain that Peking would yield railway concessions that extended foreign control deep into the Chinese interior. At the same time, there was every sign that the invading armies that had suppressed the Boxers would be slow to leave. More than two years later, despite a promise to go, Manchuria was occupied by nearly 150,000 Russian soldiers.<sup>113</sup> The momentum towards an economic share-out, or even a territorial scramble as the other powers reacted to Russia’s aggrandizement, now seemed unstoppable.

Yet China escaped partition and the economic tutelage from which foreign commercial interests had hoped to profit. The reasons were complex. There was, in the first place, almost no chance that the great powers could agree on a share-out in the way they had just done in Africa. The Russians might have liked an empire in North China. But the British, whose commercial interest was much the largest, were determined not to agree on a split. This was partly because of the view in London that there should be ‘no more Indias’ – vast Asian possessions to defend and control – least of all a ‘second India’ with a Russian army on its doorstep.<sup>114</sup> That the Boxer crisis coincided with Britain’s embarrassing difficulty in defeating the Boers, and growing war-weariness in public opinion at home, would have made any such scheme a form of political suicide. An undivided China, with a compliant government, was a much better prospect for both trade and investment. So the British and

Americans (whose outlook was similar) encouraged Japan to oppose Russia's forward movement, and in 1902 the British concluded a regional pact, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, promising military (i.e. naval) support if Japan came to blows with more than one great power – that is, if France, Russia's ally, were to enter the fray.<sup>115</sup> Neither France nor Germany, the remaining great powers with an interest in China, had sufficient incentive or adequate means to try to enforce a partition against London and Washington.

But it was not merely a question of what the imperialists wanted. Just as important was the tenacious resistance shown by the Chinese. It had always been difficult to break down the cohesion of Chinese authority, resting as it did on the self-interested loyalty of the scholar-gentry class to the dynastic regime that gave it employment. It might have been expected that the sequence of disasters since 1894–5 would have weakened the Ch'ing claim to the 'mandate of heaven'. And so it did. But the paradoxical result was a new political atmosphere much more fervently hostile to foreign interference. The 1890s had seen the rapid growth of a political movement that rejected the idea that Chinese unity depended on dynastic rule. Sun Yat-sen and his followers insisted that China was the nation state of the Han (Chinesespeaking) people and could be governed only by their chosen leaders.<sup>116</sup> The Ch'ing or Manchu dynasty was an alien tyranny.<sup>117</sup> Nor was Sun's nationalism the only form of Chinese political militancy. The newcommercial life around the treaty-port towns created fresh social forms. Associations sprang up to serve the newurban middle class self-consciously creating a 'modern' Chinese society.<sup>118</sup> Treaty-port industrialization produced a Chinese working class, a popular mass that could be used to intimidate foreign interests and enclaves. The provincial gentry, who had enjoyed increasing autonomy since the Taiping Rebellion, took over the role of defending China against the foreign threat from what increasingly seemed a corrupt and impotent dynasty. When Peking resumed the path of reform after the Boxer crisis, it played into their hands. The newarmy (modelled on those of Europe

and Japan), the new bureaucracy, the newschools and colleges, and the abolition (in 1905) of the age-old examination system with its Confucian syllabus broke what remained of the old bonds of loyalty between the scholar-gentry class and the imperial centre. In the provinces, the scholar-gentry officials blocked every effort to use the railway concessions to extend foreign influence. 'Railways are making no progress in China,' the *Times* correspondent told his foreign editor.<sup>119</sup> To British financiers, like Charles Addis of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, the Chinese demand for 'rights recovery' meant that, while foreigners could invest in the building of railways, they could not hope to control them.<sup>120</sup> When the Peking government, in a desperate effort to restore its dissolving authority and bolster its finances, proposed to take the new railways away from the provincial authorities (an imperial edict in May 1911 'nationalized' all trunk lines),<sup>121</sup> it triggered a revolt that brought down the dynasty. The end of Ch'ing rule in 1911 opened four decades of turmoil for the Chinese people. But it also signalled the end of the era when China's subjection to a *Eurocentric* world system might have been possible.

Japan had played a crucial role in checking the advance of European influence in East Asia after 1890. Ironically, it had been Japanese victory in the war of 1894–5 that had set off the race for bases and concessions among the European powers. But Japan did not play the part of 'little brother' to the Western imperialists. Japanese opinion remained deeply suspicious of European intentions, and deeply fearful of a combined Euro-American assault on Japan's precarious autonomy. The Europeans, remarked Ito Hirobumi on his 1882 tour of inquiry into Western constitutionalism, 'help and love their kith and kin and seek gradually to exterminate those who are remote and unrelated... The situation in the East is as fragile as a tower built of eggs... We have to do our utmost to strengthen and enlarge our armament.'<sup>122</sup> In *Datsua-ron* ('Leave Asia, enter Europe') (1885), the great prophet of modernization Yukichi Fukuzawa equated Asia with backwardness.