

## **Systemic Failure of China's Bifurcated World Order and the Sino-Japanese War**

By the end of the Opium war the invasion of the Western powers into Asia threatened the existence of a Sinocentric world order that had persisted for centuries surviving various dynastic changes. Japan and China, the two powers in this region forced open by Western technological and economic superiority, took vastly different paths in responding to this threat. In Japan, the invasion of Western power and ideas catalyzed a regime change and spurred a revolution in culture, technology, and thought as the West was embraced and emulated. China, however, having a greater stake in the old world order, proved unable and unwilling to integrate the West's new mode of thinking into their society.

While China did adopt Western styled institutions and methods in order to manage the new and permanent presence of the Western powers, these were simply grafted onto her existing system of world order. In this way, China was seemingly able to contend with the modern realities of their world without challenging the integrity of their old world order. However, it was not only China's foreign relations which was incompatible with the introduction of the West, but rather, her whole fundamental view of world order came to be proved incongruous.

Accordingly, China's domestic and foreign policy preceding the first Sino-Japanese war reflected a Chinese view of their world that was accommodating to, yet fundamentally incompatible with the reality of the modern world as China sought to maintain its traditional fundamental world order. The Sino-Japanese war represented the inevitable systemic failure of this old world order as events tested and finally exceeded the capability of the traditional system to accommodate the modern world.

### **China's Bifurcated World Order**

China's conflict with and defeat to Great Britain and the other Western powers proved that her Sinocentric view of world order and her established methods of foreign relations were unable to regulate conflict with the new states, nor was it able to assert itself when these conflicts resorted to force. However, even as the Western powers began to impose the treaty port system as a replacement to the old tributary system as a system for China's interaction with the West, China was as yet unable and unwilling to abandon it's traditional world view. As Fairbanks explained in his description of Sinocentricism, "China's external order was so closely related to her internal order that one could not long survive without the other (12)." In the Qing's eyes abandoning her Sinocentric old world view even in the face of such a powerful Western threat was unacceptable, as it would simultaneously bring about the dynasty's undoing.

However, normalized relations with the West yet did not demand the abandonment of this view. While accepting the treaty port system, adopting a foreign ministry in the form of the Zongli Yamen, and adopting and using methods and tools such as treaties and ambassadors, the Qing was still able to maintain its Sinocentric world order. Analogous to the self-strengthening policy which used modern borrowed tools,

technologies, and ideas within a fundamentally Chinese context, China was able to graft this modern system of foreign relations with the West on top of its old world system. China maintained its vassal states such as Vietnam and Korea, maintained dominance of the western “barbarians”, and perhaps most tellingly, kept the Zongli Yamen under the control of the Grand Council. China was able to maintain this two-tiered system of foreign relations because despite the many concessions, the Western powers still remained at the periphery physically and politically. Additionally, China’s militaristic weakness had not yet been fully realized by the Qing.

In essence, the Qing retained their Sinocentric view of the world with respect to China itself as well as the Sinic and Inner-Asia zone, while establishing a pragmatic method of accommodating and dealing with the Western powers of the Outer zone. In addition, this maintenance of the Sinic and Inner-Asia zones as spheres of influence also served the convenient pragmatic purpose of maintaining buffer states surrounding China.

### **Japan, Korea, and the collapse of the two-tiered system**

This accommodation of the old world and modern reality in China’s bifurcated system of foreign relations was soon proved to be inadequate to deal with the new and changing modern world order that had evolved and moved into East Asia. Having already conceded the tributary state of Vietnam to France as a result of the 1884 Sino-French war, the real and final challenge to China’s old world order came in the events of Japanese-Chinese rivalry over Korea that resulted in the first Sino-Japanese war. As Martina Deuchler writes in her descriptions of the Chinese-Japanese negotiations over Korea:

Korea, Shen (the Yamen’s spokesman) asserted, was a dependent of China and subject to the control of the Board of Rites... Shen stated that Korea was left to her own devices in internal matters and that she also possessed complete power of decision in the field of foreign affairs. The term *shu-kuo* Shen emphasized, denoted a country that at times sent tribute to the Ch’ing court and received the Chinese investiture and calendar... Shen categorically pronounced the invasion of a dependent country by another power a cause for war. In reply, Mori found it utterly impossible and pointless to relate the invasion or occupation of Korea to the question of Korea’s status vis-à-vis China. Shen was apparently unable to refute this contention. (27)

The negotiations and subsequent failure to gain mutual understanding reflected the intimate unavoidable clash of the new and the traditional world orders. China, from the beginning of negotiations with Japan fundamentally presumed Korea as a tributary state, as it had always been in the traditional world order. China had good cause for this belief, as Korea up till then had continued sending regular tributary missions to Beijing, and continued to defer decisions to the Qing.

However, Japan, having fully embraced and adopted Western notions of nation-states and foreign relations, was no longer able to comprehend and accept this. Again, as

Deuchler states, “Mori drew his preliminary conclusion: the Chinese term ‘dependent country’ was devoid of any meaning because it did not represent reality (28).”

The resulting conflict in points of view caused escalation from both sides over Korea. China perceived the Japanese’s posture towards Korea as an attempt to pry away a traditional vassal state, and therefore China sought to strengthen its suzerain-tributary relationship with Korea, assigning advisors to the Korean king, and shoring up its military presence. Japan, on the other hand, saw China’s claim of suzerain over Korea as an aggressive threat based on an unrealistic justification, and used it as a pretense to assert its newfound power and to perhaps fulfill its expansionist desires.

Even faced with escalating tensions and flirtations with armed conflict, China would not budge in its suzerain assertion. Instead, realizing Korea’s backwardness and weakness, attempted to open and evolve Korea’s system in a way similar to its own. China began pushing for the negotiation of treaties between Korea and the Western powers as well as for the opening up Korea to trade. However, rather than to strengthen Korea in order to assert Korea’s own independent statehood, these treaties and negotiations were always done under the auspices of China via Beijing. This attitude of strengthening Korea within the bounds of the old tributary system can be seen in the June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1882 imperial edict that “ordered that trade would be handled by the Tsungli Yamen while the regular tributary matters continued to be managed by the Board of Rites (Deuchler 133)”

In the end, it required a war with Japan ending up in China’s utter defeat to shatter her tributary system and to prove to the Qing that continuing illusion Sinocentric old-world order could no longer be maintained. As the Chinese army lay crushed by the superior Japanese technology and tactics, the Qing realized that their final vehicle for assertion of power, their military force, had crumbled alongside their political and economic power.

## **Conclusion**

China’s view of the world was fundamentally incompatible and incongruent with the new world order that had developed in Asia over the previous century. Her Sinocentric world view relied on assumptions of political, militaristic, cultural and economic dominance over her immediate neighbors as well as any other entity she encountered. Since each of these assumptions were eventually undermined by the changing world, the collapse of this system was inevitable. Even without the Japanese challenge in Korea, China would have eventually faced a similar threat of encroachment either in other protectorate areas, or upon China itself. Therefore, the nature of the Sino-Japanese war was the realization of the inevitability of the collapse of the old Chinese world order, catalyzed by the Japanese as a willing actor to challenge the Sinocentric system.

## **Works Cited**

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