Li Hongzhang

Wade-Giles romanization Li Hung-chang

Wade-Giles romanization Li Hung-chang(born Feb. 15, 1823, Hefei, Anhui province, China—died Nov. 7, 1901, Beijing), leading Chinese statesman of the 19th century, who made strenuous efforts to modernize his country. In 1870 he began a 25-year term as governor-general of the capital province, Zhili (Chihli; now Hebei), during which time he initiated projects in commerce and industry and, for long periods, conducted China's relations with the Western powers.

Early life and career

Both Li's father and Zeng Guofan, who became his mentor, took terminal degrees in the Confucian examinations, earning the status of "advanced scholars." Li started on his official career in 1844 under Zeng's guidance in Beijing, the capital; in 1847 he earned his terminal degree.

In 1850 the Taiping Rebellion, a great national religious-political upheaval, broke out and threatened to topple the dynasty. When their homeplace was threatened, Li and his father organized a local militia. Li became so involved that he stayed (unofficially) at his post even when his father died in 1855, in defiance of the traditional Confucian mourning retirement. He earned a judgeship in 1856.

Zeng Guofan, who in 1860 was governor-general of the Liangjiang provinces (central China), was organizing irregular anti-Taiping forces, and Li later joined his staff. In 1862 Li was made acting governor of Jiangsu province and traveled to Shanghai with his own troops in rented steamers. Hitherto, steamers had given the West a great advantage in the two Opium Wars with China (1839–42 and 1856–60) from which came the so-called unequal treaties, whereby China unilaterally surrendered such things as tariff autonomy and extraterritorial jurisdiction.

At just under 40 years of age, Li enjoyed high civil provincial rank and independent military power, a combination that had been forced on the central government by the exigencies of the rebellion.

For the next few years, Li worked partly with foreigners and their weapons in the anti-Taiping effort around Shanghai. Best known of these Westerners was Charles George ("Chinese") Gordon, then a 30-year-old English army officer who led the "Ever-Victorious Army," a force, later put at Li's disposal, made up of foreign mercenaries. Although Westerners tended to credit this alien force with putting down the rebellion, it was really Zeng Guofan and subordinates such as Li who accomplished the task. The immediate director of the 1864 campaign against Nanjing, the Taiping capital, was a brother of Zeng Guofan, but Li disregarded his orders to assist in that terminal action because he felt that jealousies might arise—a delicacy that hinted at Li's own eminence.

Between 1865 and 1870, Li was heavily involved in various high official assignments in central, northern, and western China, mostly to suppress other rebellions. He kept his interest in the Western-style arsenals he had established in Nanjing and Shanghai because he wanted to strengthen China against the West—or encroachment by Japan, whose modernization in the late 1860s was increasingly alarming to Li.

Appointment as governor-general of Zhili

In 1870 Li was appointed governor-general of the capital province, Zhili. Also at this time he served as a grand secretary (a central government post) and superintendent of trade for the north and thus was responsible for supervising trade with the West out of the so-called treaty ports north of the Yangtze River. Although there was a new Beijing agency for China's Western diplomatic relations, the Zongli Yamen, Li became the Chinese negotiator most familiar to foreigners. Thus, he had positions in both the central and the provincial structures, military forces at his disposal, growing prestige abroad, and, it developed, an unprecedented 25-year term of office in Zhili.

During this long tenure, Li interested himself in several major modernizing projects: another arsenal at Tianjin and improved fortifications there, the sending of young Chinese to the United States to learn new skills, a commercial steamship line, Western-built warships, a coal mine, a railroad, a telegraph line, a cotton mill, a military academy, a modern mint, and two modern naval bases. He even talked about change in the procrustean Confucian examinations. There were few other Chinese officials interested in such projects.

During these years, Li also engaged heavily in negotiations with the Japanese, the British, the French, and other treaty powers. If his efforts were not ultimately successful, this was largely a reflection of China's continuing relative military weakness, of which Li, throughout his "self-strengthening" efforts, was acutely aware. China sent a mission of apology to Great Britain in 1876 after the murder of a British official. In the same year, Japan made a treaty with Korea that ignored China's traditional suzerainty over the peninsula, and Li was not able, in a later treaty of commerce between the United States and Korea that he tried to manipulate, to get U.S. recognition of the old relationship. In 1879 China lost to Japan its suzerainty over the Ryukyu (Chinese: Liuqiu) Islands. Li sought French acceptance of Chinese suzerainty over Vietnam (Annam), but the result of the Sino-French War (1883–85) was that French suzerainty was substituted for it. Li's efforts to recover China's prestige in Korea were undercut by Japan, and, in 1885, Li and the leading Japanese statesman, Itō Hirobumi, in effect agreed to a joint protectorate over the contested peninsula. In 1894 Japan went to war with China over Korea.

In this war, Li's northern fleet bore the brunt of the conflict with Japan; virtually no assistance came from China's two other modern fleets. Again China lost a modern naval war and had to cede Taiwan and the Liaodong Peninsula to Japan, to recognize Korean independence, to open new treaty ports, to pay a large indemnity to Japan, and to grant to the Japanese all of the advantages hitherto preempted by Westerners under the unequal treaties. Li had tried to avoid this war, but his influence, nonetheless, suffered because of it. He personally opened peace negotiations in Japan in March 1895 but was wounded by a Japanese fanatic—and, ironically, it was this attack, which excited Japanese sympathy, that somewhat ameliorated the harsh peace terms. (Certain Western powers, including Russia, forced the retrocession of the Liaodong Peninsula—which Russia in effect appropriated in 1898 anyway.)

State visits abroad

Nevertheless, to many Westerners, Li was the leading Chinese statesman. In 1896 he attended the tsar's coronation and while in Russia negotiated a secret alliance between the two countries that was modern China's first equal treaty. Although he journeyed in state through western Europe and was received in Washington, D.C., by Pres. Grover Cleveland, his homecoming was chilly; probably the empress dowager had to use her influence to protect him (it was said that he bribed her for the favour). He kept his trade superintendency and in 1899 was made acting governor-general of the Liangguang provinces. His prestige was still such that he was selected to negotiate with the aggrieved Western powers after the 1900 Boxer Rebellion fiasco. Again Li had to preside at a national humiliation. He died in 1901.

Li Hongzhang did not exemplify all of the Confucian virtues. He did not have the reputation for financial disinterest enjoyed by Zeng Guofan, and much of his innovating enterprise was made with an eye to personal profit. But the terminal crisis of the dynastic Confucian system in China cannot be explained thus. Li and a few contemporaries modernized parts of China's forces to protect the old system, but within that system, with its peculiar values and organization, the modern devices could not give full service. Li saw something of this contradiction; he hoped that examination reform would give prestige to the scientific modes, but his proposals were truncated, and he was nearly alone in making them. He did support the education mission noted heretofore, but, when conservatives at court decried it as subversive to Confucian norms, Li did not stake his reputation on it, and in 1881 it was terminated. Li was adroit in manipulating the system and was unquestionably loyal to it. China's late 19th-century modernization, which was designed to save the dynasty and the traditional life, was disastrously hampered by institutional contradictions, which are nowhere better illustrated than in Li's unprecedented career.

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Additional Reading

Cite

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"Li Hongzhang." , Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 Jan. 2010. academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Li-Hongzhang/48070. Accessed 29 Sep. 2017.