

Great Britain and China 1908–1909

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Beginning at the start of the 19th century, China grew to become an ever more important region of British interest.¹ The linking of Chinese trade to the economy of the British Empire in particular brought unprecedented profits to British traders, and as such they endeavoured to an ever greater extent to expand their activities in the Middle Kingdom. To begin with, however, this trend came up against an enclosed China, which tried to restrict their influence, in particular because of the increasing imports of opium to the country. Britain, however, was dependent on this basically illegal trade, because tea could only be purchased in India using Chinese silver, which British importers acquired by importing opium to China. But British traders' increasing activities in China didn't just cause a growth in opium imports to China, but also the number of its consumers. By the second half of the 1830s, their numbers had already exceeded 10 million.² This led China's government to restrict the practice. Emperor Daoguang as such assigned

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² W. T. HANES – F. SANELLO, *Opium Wars. The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another*, Neperville 2002, p. 34.

Commissioner Lin Zexu to wipe out Chinese trade in the drug and prevent foreigners from importing it to China. The outcome was the destruction of over 1,000 tons of opium, something which did, however, lead to conflict.

One of Britain's leading traders, William Jardine (founder of the company Jardine Matheson) was able to convince Lord Palmerston's government of the necessity of opening China up to British trade. His company then provided key support to Britain's military campaigns during the First Opium War, whose outcome was China's defeat, formalised in the Treaty of Nanking (29 August 1842), which effectively secured Britain's economic interests in China through the opening of five treaty ports in which British traders were able to trade freely. Article III of the treaty was a key point, in which China's government handed over the island of Hong Kong to Britain, which was to become a key fulcrum of British power. Victory in this conflict secured the permanent presence of Britons in China, which had again to allow in an influx of British traders importing opium. Britain's status in China was then confirmed in the Second Opium War (1856–1860), which ended in the Treaty of Tientsin, which opened a further eleven ports to foreigners, and secured their permanent presence in the Middle Kingdom. Despite marked internal unrest in China, the second half of the 19th century saw an expansion of contacts between the West and the gradually declining Qing Empire, which was only able to deal with the shock its defeats at the hand of the foreigners were bringing with great difficulty.

To a certain extent, however, the Second Opium War represented the pinnacle of British influence in China, and as such its end is said by some historians to mark the end of the first phase of the so-called treaty system era (1842–1943), when Britain's concept of free trade was dominant.³ Beginning in the 1870s, however, Britain had to face up to ever greater competition from other world powers – to begin with mainly France and the USA, but later also Russia, Germany and Japan. The arrival of Japan in particular dramatically undermined the balance

³ J. K. FAIRBANK, *Dějiny Číny*, Praha 1998, p. 237.

of power of the Great Powers in China, thanks to the island empire's for some surprising victory in its war with China in 1894–1895.⁴ The Middle Kingdom's exposed weakness triggered the so-called Battle for Concessions, during which individual powers attempted to consolidate their spheres of influence and acquire ports on the Chinese coast. The wave of Chinese resistance to this pressure which culminated in the Boxer Rebellion was unable to prevent foreigners from their ever greater penetration of the country. Evidence of China's weakness was the fact that the land operations of the Russo-Japanese War over influence in Korea and Manchuria were almost completely fought within Chinese territory – a country which was not involved in the conflict. These events, however, clearly showed that Britain's dominance in China had long ago reached its zenith.

As such, at the beginning of the 20th century, Britain was having to face up to ever greater competition from other powers who were often acting more assertively and aggressively towards the Qing regime than Great Britain was. On the other hand, however, Britain through its alliance with Japan was able to prevent a number of its rivals from making advances in the region (especially Russia), and still maintained a marked dominance in the region. Although its political influence had weakened, it was still markedly dominant economically. In 1906, for example, China's imports came to more than 428 million taels, of which 144 million came from Hong Kong (this port served as a gate to mainly British goods), 78 million from Britain itself and 32 million from the British Raj.⁵ For comparison, Germany exported goods to a value of 17 million taels to China, the USA 44 million and Japan 61 million. One of Britain's arch rivals in China, Russia, exported goods to a value of just 550,000 taels.⁶

⁴ For more information, see S. C. M. PAINE, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895*, Cambridge 2005.

⁵ The National Archives, London, Kew (hereafter TNA), Foreign Office (hereafter FO) 405/171, General Report on China for the year 1906, p. 21, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, June 1, 1907.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

As such, Britain remained Chinese foreign trade's key player, and thus had to adequately secure its interests in China. Britain therefore carefully monitored anything which could affect its interests and Chinese trade as a whole. If British engagement in China were to be differentiated into its main fields of interest, these would be three core areas:

1. Chinese domestic policy – here, Britain monitored general domestic policy developments in China, both in Beijing and in each of the provinces. An important area of interest for them was reforms,⁷ which could significantly affect Britain's status in the country;
2. China's foreign policy – here, Britain monitored developments in China's relations with other countries (especially the Great Powers) and tried to prevent any particular country from becoming too much stronger within China;
3. the economy – undoubtedly the most important subject of Britain's interest in China.

Britain paid most attention to the following issues: general trade, opium imports, loans, railway construction and the economic concessions the Chinese government awarded foreign companies. The author of this article uses an analysis of British interests in China in 1908 and 1909, when China in contrast to earlier and later periods was enjoying a certain level of stability, its government was attempting to undertake reforms and Britain was able to promote its interests quite effectively, in order to probe what interests Britain was monitoring, what method it promoted them and why it did so. The following account should thus serve as a typological model of how Britain promoted itself in China in eras without significant turbulence or confusion (if something like this can even be said of the actual situation in China at the turn of the

⁷ D. TWITCHETT – J. K. FAIRBANK (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. II, part 2, pp. 375–415.

19th and 20th centuries), and what interests it monitored. The study will focus mainly on Chinese domestic and foreign policies, whose consequences were of great importance for British trade and economic concessions.

Domestic Policy

In terms of developments in China's domestic policy, Britain monitored a fairly consistent political course at the beginning of the 20th century. Its main interest was if possible to help China ensure a stable course of developments through moderate reforms. Only this kind of course could secure Britain's economic interests. Britain's ambassador, Sir John Jordan, as such carefully monitored events in China's Imperial Court and its reluctant reform efforts, which also included the preparation of a Chinese constitution, civil service reforms and an attempt at boosting the armed forces – all this mostly with the assistance of certain foreign powers.

It was in 1908 that the possible future Chinese constitution took on a more specific form. On 27 August, the commission set up for this purpose prepared a clear and specific scheme which involved limiting the Emperor's power and creating representative assemblies, including a Chinese equivalent of a Senate. Jordan acknowledged that the constitution was to be prepared on the basis of the Japanese model, but he was sorry that it was far from liberal, as the sovereign retained direct control of the armed forces without any limitations. He was also able to interfere in the judicial system, as he had decided to hold on to the right to name court officials. Notwithstanding, Britain considered these developments desirable, although its ambassador somewhat soberly stated that China would not be ready to adopt the constitution until at least 1917. He saw danger in the fact that, *"there is a complete lack of officials with the necessary training for the successful execution of the scheme, and it was probably soon noticed that it was not being undertaken with sufficient vigour"*.⁸

⁸ TNA, FO 881/9466, General Report on China for the year 1908, p. 26, Jordan to

Despite Jordan's sceptical attitude, China's government implemented the reform with "*unusual punctuality*"⁹ when Provincial Assemblies in 20 of China's 22 provinces began operating on 14 October 1909. Jordan considered this fact a great success, enabled by the hard work of Chinese officials in attempting to meet the Emperor's orders. On the other hand, however, he could not help but notice that the opportunity to take part in elections to these assemblies was significantly restricted to the wealthy and educated, and that their establishment did not arouse great enthusiasm or interest in their sessions. He also stated that although mainly local problems were discussed at the sessions, such as education reform, the opium problem and securing public safety (in some cases, members also spoke on foreign policy), it was not "*clear that anything practical was accomplished*".¹⁰ The preparations for China's future constitution underway thus left Britain with more of an ambivalent impression of a half-hearted and lengthy process which would still be markedly complex, and a year later Jordan simply drily and somewhat disappointedly stated that if he could speak of the prospect of when the constitution would be adopted, "*no one, however, can pretend that we are within measurable distance of that time, or that any real progress has been made in that direction during the past year*".¹¹ Britain became convinced of the fact that the current reforms were insufficient and the central government was no longer in control of the domestic situation as a result of the growing dissatisfaction in the provinces, expressed in a number of rebellions and disturbances,¹² which were a precursor to the coming revolution.

Besides the constitutional reforms, Britain also carefully monitored the recovery and strengthening of China's armed forces. At the begin-

Grey, Beijing, March 26, 1909.

⁹ TNA, FO 881/9657, General Report on China for the year 1909, p. 37, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 38, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

¹¹ TNA, FO 881/9867, General Report on China for the year 1910, p. 49, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 5, 1911.

¹² Ibidem, pp. 57–60, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 5, 1911.

ning of the 20th century, China's army comprised three categories of soldiers: 1. regular units; 2. provincial poorly armed forces of about 250,000 men; 3. reserves, which were made up of mainly untrained men whose military value was essentially zero and whose numbers could not even be estimated. According to British observers, the main problem with Beijing's military efforts was that their plans were very ambitious on paper (China was to have 36 divisions by 1911), but in reality there were continuously "*postponed, altered, or abandoned*".¹³ In 1908, China thus had only 8 divisions, and an undetermined number of mixed brigades. Jordan estimated Chinese soldier numbers as around 190,000 men, but he admitted himself that this figure might not be exact as there were no precise records available, something likely no-one held.¹⁴

All the army's training and new equipment were of foreign provenance. Japan especially was involved in the Chinese army reforms, having about 70 officers in China. Due to Chinese resentment towards Japan, however, these instructors had very little authority, and the troops often refused to listen to their orders, something which made effective training almost impossible. In terms of other powers, in 1908 there were only 7 German officers in China. Germany's military and industrial prestige, however, helped ensure that most orders for arms in China were taken by German companies.¹⁵ Although there was certain progress in terms of training and material equipment over the course of 1909, Jordan stated that, "*the Chinese army, therefore, though slowly improving and though the rank and file are good material, must, for the various reasons above given, be still considered as backward in efficiency and preparedness for war*".¹⁶

¹³ TNA, FO 881/9466, General Report on China for the year 1908, p. 34, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 26, 1909.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 35, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 26, 1909.

¹⁶ TNA, FO 405/195, Annual Report, 1909, p. 44, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 31, 1910.

From a British perspective, Chinese efforts to renew the navy, which had been fundamentally shaken by defeat in the war with Japan in 1894–1895, were not assessed positively either. Due to a lack of funds, China was unable to purchase a large number of new ships or additional arms. There was nothing left to do but to focus on improving the level of training and creating a new naval organisation. Britain perceived the creation of a Naval Ministry headed by Prince Tsa Hsün as one of the few positive steps of the Chinese government in terms of naval reform,¹⁷ although insufficient funding prevented the achievement of any real results. In general, it can thus be said that China's armed forces suffered from similar defects to the Chinese government itself. Indiscipline and corruption were a latent problem which prevented real changes from taking place. This could not be changed by the fact that the Beijing government was attempting to raise the prestige of the armed forces and the social status of its members, something which was, nevertheless, quite successful according to observers at the time.¹⁸ As such, Britain took a relatively sceptical stance on China's attempts at military reforms and continued to consider China a country which would find it very difficult to defend its territorial integrity in the event of conflict with any of the Great Powers. Such a course of events, however, would undoubtedly run counter to Britain's interests, and as such was vigilantly monitored.

One of the key issues in China's domestic policy which Britain monitored was, of course, the situation in the imperial court, which had a significant effect on the further direction of the Middle Kingdom. Evidently the most significant event in this regard was the almost simultaneous death of the Guangxu Emperor (14 November 1908) and the Empress Dowager Cixi (15 November 1908). Although modern historians and the media speculate intensely that the Guangxu was probably

¹⁷ TNA, FO 405/201, Annual Report, 1910, pp. 75–76, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 5, 1911.

¹⁸ E. S. K. FUNG, Military Subversion in the Chinese Revolution of 1911, in: *Modern Asian Studies*, 9, 1, 1971, p. 105.

poisoned,¹⁹ and even in Beijing at the time there was much wild speculation worrying the public and foreign diplomats, in the end the fact these deaths were almost simultaneous was said to be merely a coincidence.²⁰ In his report for the Foreign Office, Jordan rebutted any speculation and attributed the death of both major figures to poor health. His unwillingness to countenance the possibility that the Guangxu was murdered was likely a result of the fact that he was a critic of his role during the course of the Hundred Days Reform in 1898,²¹ about which he had said that the weak emperor had fallen victim to a group of dreamers who called themselves reformers without having the capability of effectively changing anything.²² In this context, it is thus no surprise that Jordan was a greater defender of Cixi's policies, and approved of her choice of heir, who became the child Emperor Xuantong (Puyi), for whom his father, Prince Chun, was to govern as Regent.

Despite the fact that the sudden death of the ageing Cixi represented a massive change in the balance of powers in the imperial court, where the Manchu faction and the Chinese stood in opposition to each other, Jordan rejected the idea that the death of such a prominent figure who had formulated Chinese policies in prior decades could lead to a coup attempt. He even claimed that the rival sides were aware of the seriousness of the situation and peace had reigned between them for a time. According to Jordan, however, it would depend on what influences the young emperor would be given during his upbringing and he hoped that Prince Chun would manage to break the power and influence of the eunuchs in the imperial court.²³ In any case, it can be

¹⁹ http://www.danwei.org/front_page_of_the_day/kindergarden.php [2015-09-25].

²⁰ TNA, FO 881/9466, General Report on China for the year 1908, p. 2, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 26, 1909.

²¹ A paradox here is that during this short episode in Chinese history when one of the most serious attempts at restricting Cixi's power occurred, and after the subsequent counter strike, a number of members of China's reform wing sought protection in Great Britain. TWITCHETT – FAIRBANK, pp. 346–347.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ TNA, FO 881/9466, General Report on China for the year 1908, p. 3, Jordan to

said that the foreign community perceived the accession of the child emperor and his young Regent (Chun was 25 years old) as a fundamental watershed in Chinese history. The Regent's reformist opinions and also the fact that he was one of the few high imperial representatives who had visited a Western country (in 1900 he had become the first member of the Qing Dynasty to travel to Europe when he had visited Germany in order to offer the Emperor's apology for the death of German diplomat Clemens von Ketteler in Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion) aroused great hope.²⁴ These initial hopes, however, were gradually dashed. Chun proved to be too weak a politician, and in early 1910 Jordan could only say that, "*while giving him credit for good intentions, all are agreed in regarding him as a weak and rather obstinate man who places little trust in responsible Ministers, and is inclined to be guided too much by the views of his brothers and other inexperienced advisors*".²⁵ The influence of the eunuchs, which had appeared to briefly wane after Cixi's death, was restored as a result of Chun's weakness. In this regard, observers compared the Regent to the late Guangxu Emperor, hailing instead Prince Tsai Tao and Prince Tsai Hsün, who headed China's armed forces.

To at least briefly summarise another domestic policy issue which foreign observers monitored in China, this was undoubtedly the temporary fall of one of the most important Chinese politicians and soldiers, Yuan Shikai, who was suddenly relieved from all his posts at the start of 1909. This figure, one of the leading representatives of reforming forces in the country, was particularly popular amongst foreign observers. On the other hand, however, he had a number of enemies who were able to take advantage of tremors in Yuan's powers after Cixi's death to remove him from office, which overturned a certain balance in the capital city in favour of the Manchu.²⁶ Yuan Shikai

Grey, Beijing, March 26, 1909.

²⁴ TNA, FO 881/9657, General Report on China for the year 1909, pp. 1–2, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 2, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

²⁶ TNA, FO 881/9466, General Report on China for the year 1908, p. 4, Jordan to

himself was to remain in enforced exile for more than two years. Except for this event, foreign observers stated that a surprising calm reigned in China.²⁷ Few realised, however, that discontent was rising within Chinese society which would grow into an open uprising against the Beijing court two years later, and a revolution which would end the almost quarter-millennia rule of the Qing Dynasty. In 1909, however, the reports of foreign observers contain little warning of such a course of events.

Foreign Policy

As was indicated in the introduction to this study, Great Britain was facing increasing competition from other powers beginning in the 1870s which (to a greater extent from the 1890s) were endeavouring to acquire their own spheres of influence in the Middle Kingdom. As such, Great Britain had to promote its interests much more cautiously, and carefully monitor the steps taken by other powers. At the same time, it had to deal with a number of major problems in its relations with China, which affected its status in the Far East and its relations with other powers.

One of the fundamental problems in Britain's relations with China was undoubtedly opium imports, which had increased dramatically since Britain's victory in the Opium Wars. Indian-grown opium had literally flooded the Chinese market and acquired millions of users throughout China, which is just further proof of the deep demoralisation of the whole of Chinese society, which had only with great difficulty come to terms with the internal convulsions and foreign pressure which had taken away the illusions the Chinese had of their political and cultural dominance over foreign "barbarians". According to contemporary estimates, around 1900 there were roughly 40 million

Grey, Beijing, March 26, 1909.

²⁷ TNA, FO 881/9657, General Report on China for the year 1909, p. 3, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

opium smokers in China, at least 15 million of whom were addicted to the drug.²⁸

Although beginning in the 1880s, growth in the importance of British (specifically Indian) opium to China fell gradually, this trend was not the result of falling opium demand, but rather the fact that many domestic agricultural producers had refocused on growing poppies and producing the drug. This fact then allowed British opium importers to use the argument against their opponents and moral critics from the Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade founded in 1874²⁹ that restricting opium imports from India would solve nothing if the Chinese government did not actively participate in the fight against the drug. Politicians and many public figures in the USA were very active in their opposition to the opium trade, and the USA became the world leader in the fight against the opium trade at the beginning of the 20th century. The new Liberal government in Britain headed by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman took on an increasingly critical stance to the opium trade, with Campbell-Bannerman telling Beijing that if it actively attempted to suppress domestic opium production, then the London government would ensure imports to China were restricted.³⁰

The outcome of these British endeavours was an edict issued by the Guangxu Emperor on 1 November 1906 which prohibited the consumption of opium. The Chinese authorities were aware, however, that the idea such an edict could lead to a reduction in consumption was naïve if it was not accompanied by radical measures. As such, it ordered major restrictions to poppy cultivation, which was only now to be permitted if the owner of the field received special confirmation issued by the state authorities. On land where (at least hypothetically)

²⁸ FAIRBANK, p. 270.

²⁹ For more on their activities, see J. LOVELL, *The Opium War*, London 2012, pp. 271–274; for more on the fight against opium imports and especially the USA's actions in this matter, see H. WRIGHT, The International Opium Commission, in: *The American Journal of International Law*, 3, 3, 1909, pp. 668–673.

³⁰ R. BICKERS, *The Scramble for China. The Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire 1832–1914*, London – New York – Toronto 2012, p. 358.

poppies were not to be grown, other crops were to be planted. The Qing government planned to go down this route to ensure a major fall in domestic opium production. In order to be able to control the number of opium users, the Guangxu Emperor's decree also ensured that all opium users were required to report to local authorities which were to issue them with permits for its purchase. Anyone not holding such a permit caught using opium was to be harshly punished.³¹ In this way, the numbers of opium smokers was to be monitored, and any further increase in the number of consumers was to be prevented.

If, however, the imperial court was serious in wanting to restrict opium consumption, it had to achieve an agreement with Britain regarding reducing Indian opium imports to China. This led to a treaty with India's government at the end of 1907. In this, India's British administration promised that over the following three years it would significantly (by 10 % each year) reduce the export of Indian opium to China in exchange for a promise from China that it would ensure proportionate and adequate restrictions in domestic production, and restrict opium imports from Persia and other countries of the Near and Middle East.³² Each point in the agreement came into force over the course of 1908, when the British authorities in China reduced the number of licences for importing opium to China. China's government then unilaterally restricted imports from Persia and the Ottoman Empire, as these countries did not have any unequal treaties concluded with China and thus China's government was able to regulate trade with them.³³ These attempts at restricting opium imports to China reached a kind of culmination during a meeting of the International Opium Commission in Shanghai in 1909 presided by Bishop Charles Henry Brent of America's Episcopal Church. The purpose of the meeting was

³¹ A. BAUMLER, *Modern China and Opium*, Ann Arbor 2001, p. 67.

³² TNA, FO 371/414, General Report on Opium, Beijing, January 11, 1908; compare with TNA, FO 881/9229, General Report on China for the year 1907, p. 7, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, February 27, 1908.

³³ TNA, FO 881/9466, General Report on China for the year 1908, p. 5, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 26, 1909.

to prepare a recommendation which would serve for further international meetings as a model for suppressing the opium trade. Although Britain more or less acknowledged this development, Ambassador Jordan did make it clear that he considered the issue of opium imports to China above all a matter of Anglo-Chinese relations.³⁴

This British diplomatic stance was undoubtedly the result of a number of complaints by British traders who complained that restricting opium imports to China was a breach of contractual relations. According to Jordan, however, it was Britain's moral duty to help the Chinese government in suppressing the use of the drug, and as such he more or less ignored the calls of British opium importers to lodge an official protest with the Chinese government over its restriction. As such, Jordan essentially restricted Britain to merely checking China was observing prior agreements, and ensuring Chinese opium producers did not acquire a monopoly in the distribution of opium in the country after the restrictions to its import, something which would essentially negate any kind of endeavour to improve the situation regarding the trade and use of opium.³⁵ As such, in 1910, Sir Alexander Hosie was sent on a mission to China in order to assess the current situation and to determine whether the various points of prior agreements were being observed. The outcome of his research was more than satisfactory. After travelling through most areas containing domestic opium producers, Hosie could state that the overall fall in domestic production was of the order of 30 %.³⁶ In terms of the fight against opium use, this represented an extraordinary success for a British policy over just a three year period. At the same time, since the beginning of the 20th century, this serious problem had been brought to the attention not just of the public the world over, who expressed their opposition to

³⁴ TNA, FO 881/9657, General Report on China for the year 1909, p. 7, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 8, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

³⁶ TNA, FO 881/9867, General Report on China for the year 1910, p. 17, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 5, 1911.

the continuation of the practice, but also of the Chinese authorities and scholars.

Over the course of 1909 and 1910, the issue of opium consumption became a common subject of discussion in Chinese newspapers and at China's provincial assemblies. This resulted in growing calls on the government to ban completely the smoking and cultivation of opium as soon as possible (ideally by 1911). In order that the use of opium could be further restricted, the Chinese government was to negotiate with the foreigners to get a promise that opium imports would be stopped. In provinces where opium cultivation had been eradicated, imports of the drug were to be completely banned.³⁷ Britain took a rather reserved and cautious position to the proposals; in any case, the British government's endeavours to restrict opium imports to China had met with indisputable success. While at the start of the period looked at, 10–15 % of cultivated land was devoted to opium, this share had fallen to around 2–5 % by 1914.³⁸

The culmination of this policy supported by other powers was signature of the International Opium Convention on 23 January 1912, which was to secure international oversight over opium imports to China.³⁹ The fall of the Qing Dynasty and subsequent period of chaos and civil wars, however, reversed this hopeful course. Many local provincial rulers resorted to growing and distributing opium in subsequent years in order to increase their income so they could purchase weapons. This new growth in domestic production then led to imports also growing again, since foreign opium producers were able to argue that China was not observing the agreement which was used as a basis for import restrictions. As such, despite the endeavours of British diplomacy, opium became one of the key issues in China's history right up to the mid-20th century. Proof of just how strong-rooted opium use in China was is the fact that even after the new fight against

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 22, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 5, 1911.

³⁸ TWITCHETT – FAIRBANK, p. 8.

³⁹ <http://www.worldlii.org/int/other/LNTSer/1922/29.html> [2015-09-30].

opium in the 1930s led by the Kuomintang party, there were incidents at many places in China during which local producers and users tried to prevent government officials from implementing anti-opium regulations, despite the fact they could face the death penalty for doing so.⁴⁰ Britain's endeavours to restrict opium consumption at the beginning of the 20th century was thus not to be fulfilled until much later.

Besides the issue of opium imports, Britain had to deal with a number of other problems. These included, for example, Tibet, to which a British expedition set out in 1903–1904 due to fears (which it should be noted were exaggerated), of Russian influence in the country and because of disputes over the Tibet-Burma border.⁴¹ In 1908, the British government's main interest regarding Tibet was to conclude an agreement on regulating Tibetan trade which was to help Britain penetrate this remote region economically. It was originally anticipated that the agreement would be signed during the course of 1907, but as Jordan bemoaned, delays in discussing the issue were the result of China's initial unwillingness to accept the proposals of India's British administration.⁴² In the end, however, China had to give in, and the agreement was signed on 20 April 1908 to apply for ten years. It guaranteed British traders free access to the country and the right to trade anywhere within Tibetan territory.⁴³ Despite this securing of British interests, however, London was concerned by rumours of a planned Chinese invasion which, according to available information, was to secure Chinese control over Tibet.⁴⁴ Despite these fears, it was absolutely

⁴⁰ LOVELL, p. 308.

⁴¹ For more on Britain's expedition see C. ALLEN, *Duel in the Snows. The True Story of the Young-husband Mission to Lhasa*, New York 2004.

⁴² TNA, FO 881/9466, General Report on China for the year 1908, p. 8, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 26, 1909; compare with TNA, FO 371/408, India Office to Foreign Office, January 2, 1908.

⁴³ FO 371/412, Wilton to Indian Office, Calcutta, April 23, 1908; compare with C. BELL, *Tibet Past and Present*, Delhi 2000, p. 296.

⁴⁴ TNA, FO 881/9466, General Report on China for the year 1908, p. 9, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 26, 1909.

clear that Tibet fell within Britain's sphere of interests and fears of possible control of the territory by another power which were a motivation for the prior British invasion, fell completely by the wayside.

Jordan had to deal with a whole range of partial problems in regard to other major foreign policy issues which arose from Britain's economic rights and the operation of British companies within Chinese territory. Some examples here would be the case of the Anhui Mining Company or the Kiangpei Ting Coal and Iron Company, which came up against resistance from Chinese authorities and local opposition, resulting in major losses for both companies, which had to be recovered from the Chinese government as compensation.⁴⁵ These cases make it clear that British companies could only operate in China with the support of their government, the only institution able to enforce their interests in the event of any conflict. As such, dealing with such problems was quite a common task for the British legation in Beijing. In terms of China's foreign policy, however, another issue of undoubted importance for London was the status of the other powers in the Middle Kingdom. As such, Jordan carefully monitored their relations with China.

Fairly significant interest was paid in London to the arrival of Japan in China, its victory in the Russo-Japanese War giving it major interests in northern China from whose hands it definitively took any kind of influence over Korean affairs. It is clearly for this reason that relations between Tokyo and Beijing were markedly tense. China did not appreciate the growing influence of its Asian neighbour in Manchuria, which had further taken on a certain kind of paternalistic position towards Beijing with Japan's Foreign Minister, Count Hayashi, recommending China avoid Korea's fate and rather "*set her house in order*".⁴⁶ The Japanese minister, however, was just fanning the flames with such statements, as at the same time there were disputes between both states

⁴⁵ TNA, FO 881/9657, General Report on China for the year 1909, pp. 9–12, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

⁴⁶ TNA, FO 881/9466, General Report on China for the year 1908, p. 17, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 26, 1909.

over the railway in southern Manchuria, and the scandal over Japan's Tatsu Maru ship which had been seized by the Chinese authorities in Canton for apparently smuggling weapons in February 1908. This resulted in a major Japanese protest which then triggered a retaliatory boycott of Japanese products in southern Chinese cities. The first half of 1908 was thus marked by ever-worsening Sino-Japanese relations, which didn't even improve after Hayashi's removal from his ministerial post and the attempts of his successors, Terauchi Masatake and Komura Jutarō, to improve relations between China and Japan. Jordan, however, in regard to this attempt merely drily observed: *"but in spite of these demonstrations of friendliness Japan has still the misfortune to be regarded with suspicion by China, and it is a strange irony of fate, that the only nation in the East which has succeeded in working out its own salvation on modern lines should win the admiration of the Western Powers and fail to gain the confidence and respect of its neighbours in the East"*.⁴⁷ Not even 1909 saw a more fundamental change. Japan and China found themselves in protracted disputes over Japanese demands for concessions which Tokyo was meant to receive on the basis of the Portsmouth peace treaty which had ended the Russo-Japanese War.⁴⁸ Japan was furthermore a British ally, and in this regard was not a greater threat to Britain, although Britain kept a very close eye on Japan's infiltration of northern China.

Another of the powers engaged in northern China, specifically Manchuria – Russia – was notably weakened through its defeat in its war with Japan, and its influence in China was markedly reduced. Subsequently to 1907, when Russia concluded a convention with Japan guaranteeing the status quo in the Far East, St Petersburg's influence was essentially limited to northern Manchuria where, as Jordan noted, neither Great Britain nor its subjects had major interests.⁴⁹ As such,

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ TNA, FO 881/9657, General Report on China for the year 1909, pp. 20–26, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

⁴⁹ TNA, FO 881/9466, General Report on China for the year 1908, p. 21, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 26, 1909.

Britain decided more or less not to interfere in Russo-Chinese disputes over concessions in Russia's spheres of influence and was basically satisfied with the clear weakening of Russia's position in the Far East which was expressed, for example, in the fact that in attempting to push through its railway concession in northern Manchuria, St Petersburg had to rely on support from Tokyo.⁵⁰ Japan at least to begin with, however, came into conflict with Russia in regard to Russia's railway projects, fearing they could serve as a cover for future Russian expansion, as had been the case before the Russo-Japanese War.⁵¹ However, since it was mainly British companies which were to be involved in the construction of the railways in northern China, adding the know-how and funding needed, Japan's resistance met with their protests. On the other hand, it should be noted that in order to maintain good relations, Britain tried to accommodate Tokyo and blocked a number of Russian proposals.⁵² As such, subsequent to 1905 Russia did not represent a major threat for Britain in China, which can be demonstrated by the fact that the volume of Russian trade with China did not even reach half a percent of Britain's trade with the Middle Kingdom (when British colonies and other dependent territories are included).

Of the other Great Powers, Great Britain paid great attention to France, which was continuously strengthening its sphere of influence in southern China, something it was significantly aided in by the acquisition of the territory of Guangzhouwan in 1898, and concession for building the railway from Kunming to Haiphong in Indochina which was implemented from 1904 to 1910.⁵³ It was in 1908 that the French acquired a pretext for increasing its pressure on China. At the beginning

⁵⁰ TNA, FO 881/9657, General Report on China for the year 1909, p. 29, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

⁵¹ TNA, FO 371/410, Memorandum on the Japanese Government's Protest against Construction of the Northern Railways, January 8, 1908.

⁵² TNA, FO 371/410, Memorandum of the Pauling Company Limited, February 4, 1908.

⁵³ For more, see J.F. ROUSSEAU, *An Imperial Railway Failure. The Indochina-Yunnan Railway, 1898–1941*, in: *Journal of Transport History*, 35, 1, 2014, pp. 1–17.

of that year, a group of Chinese rebels (referred to in documents as revolutionaries) crossed the border between China and Vietnam. When an officer of the local French garrison tried to apprehend them, he was killed in the subsequent skirmish. France immediately demanded intervention by the Chinese authorities against the rebels operating across the border between China and Vietnam. They also demanded compensation for the family of the officer killed, and punishment of the guilty parties. At the same time, however, they also demanded the removal of the governor of Yunnan Province and an expansion of its railway concessions, which would significantly increase French influence and economic penetration in southern China. Although the French government failed in this regard, it did force Beijing to make a monthly payment of 4,500 taels which was to be used to protect the French involved in railway construction.⁵⁴ In general, however, French engagement in China can be said to be mostly unsuccessful. French interests remained limited to just southern China, and Jordan often stated that it was a great problem for French representatives in Beijing to enforce the fulfilment of the agreements which France demanded from China. As such, French engagement in China over the period looked at did not represent a major threat to Great Britain's interests.⁵⁵

German penetration of China represented a much more serious potential for danger for Britain. Jordan had noticed that despite a range of incidents and Germany's particularly aggressive position over the course of the Boxer Rebellion, German policy had proven able to adjust well to local conditions. In order to correct the poor reputation it had acquired at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Berlin began an era of a conciliatory policy towards China. In contrast to other powers, it did not force any agreements upon China with the threat of force. Instead, Germany favoured a patient policy of small steps, which enabled Germany "*in large part to rehabilitate her good name, and*

⁵⁴ TNA, FO 881/9466, General Report on China for the year 1908, p. 22, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 26, 1909.

⁵⁵ TNA, FO 881/9657, General Report on China for the year 1909, p. 36, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

has greatly strengthened her chance of participating in the economic development of China".⁵⁶ Furthermore, Germany was able to very successfully take advantage of the weaknesses of its rivals. Britain was in a certain manner at a disadvantage because China often linked it to its support for Japanese expansionism, while France was often linked with attempts at expanding the operations of its Catholic missionaries. These facts allowed Germany to acquire a range of railway and mining concessions in the province of Shandong.⁵⁷

On the other hand, however, Germany was not strong enough to promote its interests with the Chinese government alone. As such, Berlin had no choice but to find a strong partner which could open China's door to it. As a result, Germany co-operated with Britain, the only country with sufficient influence to be able to help Germany promote its interests, in exchange for specific compromises and the option for British companies to participate in German projects. German envoy in Beijing, Arthur von Rex, complained numerous times that this dependency damaged German interests, because they were dependent on British consent on the basis of British terms being met.⁵⁸ A certain threat not just for German, but undoubtedly also British, interests, was an ever-strengthening movement in China at the time whose objective was the national construction of their own railway lines, which would then be in the hands of Chinese companies instead of foreigners.⁵⁹ On the other hand, this trend allowed Britain (and Germany) to finance such attempts through loans.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ TNA, FO 881/9466, General Report on China for the year 1908, p. 23, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, March 26, 1909.

⁵⁷ TNA, FO 881/9657, General Report on China for the year 1909, p. 35, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

⁵⁸ L. NOVOTNÝ, *Great Britain, Germany, and the Selected Railway Problems in China 1907–1908*, in: *Prague Papers on the History of International Relations*, 2, 2014, p. 101.

⁵⁹ A. SKŘIVAN, *Výstavba železniční sítě v Číně do světové hospodářské krize*, in: *Acta universitatis Carolinae – Philosophica et Historica*, 1, 1974, pp. 15–18.

⁶⁰ Following the fall of the Qing Dynasty however, there had to be an extensive reorganisation of Chinese loans. K.C. CHAN, *British Policy in the Reorganization*

In regard to relations between Germany and Britain in China, we should also note the issue of the withdrawal of the Great Powers' military contingents from China after the Boxer Rebellion, something keenly monitored by Britain. In March 1909, Jordan was able to state with satisfaction that 600 German soldiers had left northern China and returned to Germany. As such, just 159 German soldiers remained in the area, 120 of whom were based in Beijing, and 39 in Tianjin. He did warn, however, that Germany had about 2,000 soldiers in Qingdao.⁶¹ Nevertheless, Britain did not perceive Germany's engagements as a threat in terms of power. Its economic policy was, however, criticised, Jordan terming it speculative and reckless.⁶² He particularly criticised the fact that German companies were selling goods using a large loan provided by German banks. Although Jordan claimed that this policy could bring a certain success, it would lead to German companies making huge losses in the event of unsuccessful trading, and only contributed to the high level of corruption amongst China's state administration representatives.⁶³

In contrast to Great Britain and the other powers, the USA had always endeavoured to play the role of "friend of the Chinese people" and essentially did not get involved in most of the core disputes. Its interest was purely economic, and only exceptionally did America get involved in the internal affairs of the Middle Kingdom. In 1909 however, this traditional position underwent a huge change with the arrival of the Taft administration. William Howard Taft in 1901–1903 had held the post of Governor of the Philippines, and this had given him a clear

Loan to China 1912–13, in: *Modern Asian Studies*, 5, 4, 1971, pp. 355–372; for more on the British loans to China over the period in question, see I. PHIMINSTER, *Foreign Devils, Finance and Informal Empire. Britain and China c. 1900–1912*, in: *Modern Asian Studies*, 40, 3, 2006, pp. 737–759.

⁶¹ TNA, FO 881/9657, General Report on China for the year 1909, p. 35, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁶³ TNA, FO 881/9657, General Report on China for the year 1909, p. 36, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

idea of the situation in the Far East and he was convinced that the USA had to practise a much more active foreign policy. This was one of the reasons he removed envoy William Woodwill Rockhill from Beijing at the end of 1909, replacing him with William James Calhoun, who just ten days after taking office (21st December 1909) publicly announced that the USA was ready to take up concession entitlements from prior treaties.⁶⁴ This fact made Britain markedly wary, as a large American engagement in China could lead to disturbance of the current balance of power, something which could have a negative impact on British trade. On the other hand, however, Jordan also saw a number of advantages, since America's aggressive attempt at acquiring a share in railway concessions in northern China was causing significant worry in Tokyo. As such, Jordan predicted that an active American policy in China could also have positive consequences for Britain. On the one hand, it could strengthen Anglo-Japanese relations and it would also force Tokyo and St Petersburg to definitively put their past squabbles to bed, removing one of the potential sources of conflict in the Far East. The aggressive American policy also damaged Washington's long-enforced "open door" policy, and Jordan expressed the hope that *"the policy of United States will, with further experience, gradually assume a more practical character"*.⁶⁵ Under this situation, there was thus no need to be particularly worried about the USA's greater engagement in China.

Conclusion

It can generally be said that following the turbulent period of the 1890s and the first five years of the first decade of the 20th century, it appeared that the situation in China had at least in part become calmer. Great Britain had no need in this period to deal with any major crises and could thus focus on intensifying its economic penetration of the Middle Kingdom. Although its representatives monitored the domestic

⁶⁴ Ibidem, p. 30, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, p. 32–33, Jordan to Grey, Beijing, January 30, 1910.

situation in China, unless British interests were under threat they left events to take their course and did not interfere too much in them. The same applied more or less to Britain's relations with other powers. Although Britain monitored its rivals, it did not get into any major dispute with any of the Great Powers over the period looked at. Although Britain was concerned by Germany's penetration into China, on the other hand it was beneficial for British traders to collaborate with Germans on a whole range of projects, something British diplomacy also adapted to. The same more or less applied to the activation of American policy, although this course was not considered a major threat – in fact, it even appeared to London that the USA abandoning its previous "open door" practice and favouring more traditional forms of economic penetration and expanding its power in China could have a number of benefits for Britain. The only possible threat to British interests thus could come from within China itself. As such, Britain monitored the course of Chinese reforms which although occasionally were hopeful, were more often than not disappointing, such as was the case in regard to Prince Chun's policies. The weak Chinese government, the inability of the Qing Dynasty to enforce and undertake adequate reforms and growing unrest in China led just two years later to a complete transformation of the situation in the Far East. The years 1908 to 1909 should thus be considered a rare period in China's situation at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries – these were two years which ran their course in relative calm and allowed Britain to penetrate China economically in a peaceful manner. This did not apply in the subsequent period, however, which brought a number of convulsions which transformed not only China's domestic situation, but also the status of Great Britain in the Far East. The described period can, despite the fierce competition Britain was facing, thus be considered to be one of the pinnacles of British influence in China.

Abstract

At the beginning of the 20th century Great Britain had to guard its interests in China against the competition of other Great Powers. The British diplomacy therefore payed

close attention to the internal situation in China. It focused mainly on the enforcement of its economic (especially trade) interests and maintaining its concessions in China. In order to accomplish these tasks, the British diplomats followed closely the internal situation in China – especially its efforts to reform its government, military or law. They also paid close attention to the relation of China towards other Great Powers and their influence in the Middle Kingdom. Great Britain also had to solve several important problems in its own relations with China. The most important of these was the question of the opium trade and the effort of the Chinese government to suppress its consumption. China was able to accomplish this important task only with the help of Great Britain.

Keywords

Great Britain; China; USA; Economy; International Relations; Trade; Military; Opium