

Western imperial ambitions in China

The losses China suffered at the end of the First Opium War were intensified by further losses in the Second Opium War in 1860, this time fought against the British and the French. The Qing Dynasty was facing enormous pressure in the latter half of the 19th century. Not only were Western powers demanding more from China, but the Qing Dynasty was also faced with internal catastrophes. The Taiping Rebellion from 1850 to 1864 against the Qing engaged Qing forces for years and ended up with the death of at least 20 million Chinese. Further humiliation for the Qing came from the fact that the Qing had to eventually call upon Western forces to help put down the rebellion. A huge population increase in the 18th and 19th centuries in China, accompanied by drought and famine in these years, also taxed the Qing government.

A series of young and weak emperors added to the problems of the dynasty. By the turn of the century, China was firmly under the control of the Empress Dowager, Cixi, who kept the young Guangxu Emperor under a tight control and even had him placed under house arrest when he and some of his Court supporters attempted to introduce modernising reforms into China's system of government.

By the end of the 19th century, European nations had staked their claims on whole regions of the world in a push for colonies. Colonial expansion had become a major policy of European nations and the rivalry among them increased the tensions in Europe. Nations began establishing formal associations with other nations in Europe to give them powerful 'friends' to combat the influence of their rivals. Germany had established an alliance with Austria–Hungary and Italy in 1872 and then France and Russia agreed to an alliance in 1894.

The Dutch preceded the British Trading Post on Taiwan. Note that Taiwan was not considered part of the Qing Empire until after 1683.

China was not 'colonised' by Western powers but these powers established 'spheres of influence' in China, where their own particular trading interests were to be paramount. While China's territory was not taken over directly as colonial possessions, this was little comfort to the Chinese, who saw their sovereignty disintegrating. In these spheres of influence, Europeans were to be treated as citizens of their own countries (extraterritoriality) and were not subject to the laws of China. What became particularly galling was that these spheres of influence were to be open to the uncontrolled activities of Christian missionaries.

Such a policy was opposed by the United States which preferred access to all parts of China. The United States preferred an 'open door' policy, proposed by Secretary of State John Hay, where all nations had equal access to trade with China. While this might appear on the surface to have protected China from partition, as had happened in Africa, it still flouted the sovereignty of China. From the Chinese point of view there was little difference between having certain parts of China under the influence of a particular European power compared to having all of them with equal access to China.