

China's Foreign Relations and Wars With Neighboring Countries Since Modern Times

SI Nian

Jinan University, Guangzhou, China

Since modern times, with the development of social economy, the self-sufficient small-peasant economy under feudal rule has gradually disintegrated, and the capitalist economy has emerged and grown. China's trade continued to expand. The Ming government exchanged large quantities of goods with neighboring countries, fostering economic and trade development between China and its neighbors, and its influence extended beyond Southeast Asia, even leaving traces of Chinese commercial activities in Europe and Africa, thereby deepening other regions' longing for China.

Keywords: trade, treaty, war, foreign relations

Foreign Relations of China in the Ming Dynasty

To promote national prestige, enhance the Ming Dynasty's political influence globally, and develop overseas trade—particularly tributary trade—the Ming government encouraged other countries to conduct trade in China through the tributary system. From 1405 to 1433, the Ming government dispatched Zheng He to lead fleets on seven maritime expeditions, spanning 28 years and visiting over 30 countries and regions in Asia and Africa. The fleets traversed the South China Sea islands, crossed from Asia to Africa, and paid friendly visits to dozens of countries and regions, including central Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malacca, Malaysia, Sumatra, Palembang, Indonesia, Bangladesh, southwestern India (Cochin, Chola), Sri Lanka, the Maldives, the Persian Gulf Port of Julfar, the Arabian Peninsula, Somalia, and Kenya. The farthest reach was the Red Sea mouth and the east coast of Africa, crossing the Equator.

Zheng He's voyages held great significance: They expanded peaceful exchanges between China and Asian-African countries, promoted economic and cultural interactions, and elevated the Ming Dynasty's international status. After the voyages, a continuous stream of Asian-African envoys visited China for diplomatic exchanges and trade, and the number of Chinese migrants to Southeast Asian nations increased steadily. They brought advanced Chinese production technologies and handicrafts to Southeast Asia, greatly boosting local development. These voyages also broadened Chinese perspectives. Travelers like Ma Huan (author of *Yingya Shenglan* [Record of the Voyages]), Fei Xin (author of *Xingcha Shenglan* [Record of the Starry Rafts]), and Gong Zhen (author of *Xiyang Fanguozhi* [Account of the Foreign States of the Western Seas]) documented the conditions of the visited countries, enriching China's geographical knowledge of overseas regions.

In the early Ming Dynasty, the government prohibited private overseas trade except for tributary trade. By the mid-Ming period, private maritime trade flourished. In the first year of the Longqing era (1567), the Ming

SI Nian, Master, Institute of Ancient Books, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China.

government lifted the maritime ban, allowing private trade with foreign states—known as the “Longqing Opening”. This reform legalized private overseas trade, ushering in a new era for coastal regions in southeastern China and creating a more open atmosphere for the Ming Dynasty.

In 1591, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the shogun of Japan, launched a war of aggression against Korea. Korea requested military assistance from the Ming Dynasty, which immediately dispatched troops. Allied Sino-Korean forces inflicted a severe defeat on the Japanese army, nearly restoring all of Korea's territory. Hideyoshi then pretended to seek peace, prompting the Ming Dynasty to withdraw its troops. However, Japanese forces invaded Korea again, and the Ming government sent Minister of War Xing Jie to lead troops to aid Korea, inflicting heavy casualties on the Japanese. In 1598, allied Sino-Korean forces engaged in a decisive naval battle with the Japanese in the South China Sea of Korea, annihilating almost the entire Japanese fleet. During the battle, veteran Ming general Deng Zilong and Korean national hero Yi Sun-sin fought side by side and sacrificed their lives, writing a glorious chapter in the history of friendly relations between the two countries.

Foreign Relations of China in the Qing Dynasty

After the Qing army entered the Shanhai Pass and unified China, to prevent Zheng Chenggong from counterattacking the mainland and to control interactions between Han Chinese on the mainland and Zheng Chenggong, the Qing government imposed a strict maritime ban in the 13th year of the Shunzhi era. Later, to monopolize and control foreign trade, in the 59th year of the Kangxi era, it designated Guangdong merchants to form the “Thirteen Hongs”, specializing in foreign trade. In the 22nd year of the Qianlong era (1757), the Qing government closed other ports, restricting foreign trade to Guangzhou alone, implementing a policy of seclusion.

In the mid-Qing period, cultural exchanges between the Qing Dynasty and Joseon (Korea) were close. Most Chinese books spread to Joseon. Liu Xihai compiled *Haidong Jinshi Yuan* [Garden of Eastern Sea Inscriptions and Stones] using books donated by Koreans. Korean scholar Park Ji-won visited China as an envoy and wrote *Ryeonghae Ilgi* [Diary of Rehe], whose copied Chinese agricultural tools greatly promoted improvements in Joseon's agricultural technology. Korean envoy Hong Daeboon and Yan Cheng from Qiantang became friends in Beijing, known as the “Hong-Yan Friendship” in their time.

In the early Qing Dynasty, conflicts broke out between China and Russia. Starting from the 1640s, Russia continuously invaded areas east of Lake Baikal, which belonged to Mongol tribes in northern Mongolia, and gradually encroached on China's Mongolian regions through 蚕食 (incremental occupation). The Qing government strengthened border defenses in Mongolia, deterring Russia from taking rash actions. In 1685 and 1686, Emperor Kangxi dispatched troops to repel Russian aggression.

During the Second Opium War, the Qing government was forced to sign a series of unequal treaties, ceding territory and paying reparations, further reducing China's sovereignty.

In the late Qing Dynasty, China faced frequent foreign invasions, including the Opium Wars, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, and the Boxer Uprising, leading to the country's decline and humiliation.

Modern Chinese Foreign Relations and Wars (1840-1945)

1. Opium wars and unequal treaties:

- First Opium War (1840-1842): Triggered by British opium smuggling, the war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), China's first unequal treaty, ceding Hong Kong and paying 21 million taels of silver.

- Second Opium War (1856-1860): Allied British and French forces occupied Beijing, burning the Old Summer Palace. The Treaty of Tientsin (1858) and Convention of Peking (1860) forced China to open more ports, cede territory, and pay additional reparations, deepening its semi-colonialization.

2. Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895:

- Fought over influence in Korea, the war ended with China's defeat. The Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895) ceded Taiwan and the Penghu Islands to Japan, paid 200 million taels of silver, and opened four more ports, dealing a severe blow to China's national strength.

3. Boxer Uprising and the Boxer Protocol (1901):

- The anti-imperialist Boxer Uprising was suppressed by an eight-nation alliance. The Boxer Protocol imposed an indemnity of 450 million taels of silver on China, placing it under further foreign control.

4. World War II and the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-1945):

- Japanese Invasion of Manchuria (1931): Japan seized Manchuria, establishing the puppet state of Manchukuo.

- Full-Scale Invasion (1937): The Marco Polo Bridge Incident triggered Japan's full-scale invasion of China.

- Nationalist front battlefield: Under the agreement between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Communist Party of China (CPC), the KMT organized the front battlefield, engaging in major campaigns from October 1937 to December 1938, including the Battle of Shanghai, Battle of Xinkou, Battle of Taiyuan, Battle of Xuzhou, Battle of Taierzhuang, and Battle of Wuhan. Approximately 2.83 million Chinese troops participated, making China the battlefield with the largest troop deployment and casualties in the Asian theater of World War II. These campaigns shattered Japan's illusion of conquering China in three months and achieved a major victory in the Battle of Taierzhuang, eliminating over 10,000 Japanese troops.

- CPC behind the enemy lines battlefield: The CPC organized the Eighth Route Army and New Fourth Army to conduct guerrilla warfare and anti-mop-up operations, scoring victories such as the Battle of Pingxingguan and the Hundred Regiments Offensive, though heavy sacrifices were made.

- Chinese expeditionary force in Burma (1942-1945): To defend Burma, China and Britain formed a military alliance in 1941. From March to August 1942, the expeditionary force fought Japanese troops, covering over 1,500 kilometers and inflicting rare heavy defeats on Japan since the start of the Pacific War. Victories included the Battle of Toungoo, Battle of Swat, and Battle of Yenangyaung. Later, the counteroffensive of the Chinese Expeditionary Force and the Chinese Army in India reopened international supply lines, expelled Japan from southwest China, and laid the groundwork for Allied reconquest of Burma.

- Final phase of the war of resistance: In late 1944, the CPC launched local counteroffensives. By the end of 1944, the anti-Japanese base areas had a population of 91.5 million, with nearly 780,000 troops and 1.7 million militia, laying a solid foundation for the general counteroffensive.

- Surrender of Japan: On August 6 and 9, 1945, the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, respectively. On August 9, 1.5 million Soviet troops invaded Northeast China, annihilating over 600,000 Japanese Kwantung Army troops. On August 15, Japan announced its unconditional surrender, and the surrender ceremony was held on September 2. Taiwan was returned to China.

Conclusion

Reflecting on China's relations with neighboring countries since modern times, China experienced a trajectory from prosperity to decline, endured humiliation and oppression, and finally embarked on the path of

independence, liberation, and development. These events demonstrate that a country can only avoid being bullied, achieve sound development, foster friendly relations with neighboring countries, drive their progress, and promote world peace and development by being strong. Only through continuous growth can China attain genuine peace, seek benefits and well-being for humanity, and bring positive value to the people of the world.

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