Li Hongzhang was born in Hefei, Anwei (modern Anhui) Province, the second son of a successful landowner and scholar-official. He earned the jinshi degree (in the Chinese civil service examination system, the highest degree a scholar could attain) at the age of only twenty-four and earned an appointment to the prestigious Hanlin Academy in Beijing, where he became the protégé of an eminent official, Zeng Guofan. In 1853 Li returned to his hometown to help his father establish a local militia to defend the region against Nian rebels. Five years later he left Anwei for Jiangxi Province to join Zeng and his powerful Hunan (Xiang) Army in combating anti-Qing Taiping rebels in southern China. From these auspicious beginnings Li would go on to become one of the Qing dynasty’s (1644–1912) foremost military leaders, a valuable contributor to China’s efforts at self-strengthening in technology and defense, and a renowned diplomat.

In 1861 Li was appointed governor of Jiangsu Province and arrived the next year in Shanghai with his newly organized militia, known as the “Huai Army.” Hand-picked generals and loyal troops made this one of the finest military forces in China. Working in conjunction with Zeng’s army and foreign troops of the Ever Victorious Army, Li was finally able to crush the Taiping Rebellion in 1864. He was rewarded for his military accomplishments with an appointment as imperial commissioner to suppress the Nian Rebellion and promotion to governor-general of Hunan and Hubei provinces. After a difficult campaign against the Nian rebels in Anwei Province, Li finally brought the uprising to an end in August 1868. For his success in pacifying the region, Li was awarded the honorific title of Grand Guardian of the Heir Apparent.

Foreign Diplomacy

In response to the Tianjin Massacre of 21 June 1870, in which a French consul and eighteen other foreigners, including ten Catholic nuns, were killed by a Chinese mob, Li marched his Huai Army to Tianjin as a show of force. En route he was reassigned as governor-general of Zhili Province, replacing his ailing mentor, Zeng Guofan, in this politically sensitive post. During his twenty-five-year tenure in Zhili, Li became China’s chief negotiator of critical issues with foreign powers. In 1876 he concluded the Chefoo Convention with Great Britain, regulating trade along China’s border with Burma (Myanmar). In 1883 he defused a tense situation in Korea between Chinese and Japanese troops but that same year was unable to prevent French advances in Vietnam. The subsequent Sino-French war (1884–1885) resulted in the near-total destruction of China’s southern fleet and a relatively quick...
victory for the French. Li negotiated the convention ending this conflict, which recognized France’s suzerainty (dominion) over Vietnam. In 1894 smoldering tensions in Korea erupted into war between China and Japan. Again China was quickly defeated, and Li was called to negotiate a settlement. The Treaty of Shimonoseki formally ending the hostilities granted Japan an indemnity of 230 million tael (a value based on the weight of silver) and ceded Chinese territory, including the island of Formosa and the Pescadores. Stipulations might have been more severe if Li had not been wounded by a Japanese fanatic during negotiations. Nevertheless, Li bore the brunt of criticism for this humiliating treaty and for the loss of his northern fleet during the war. He was reassigned to non-political posts but still conducted one more controversial negotiation. In 1896, while in St. Petersburg, Russia, to attend the coronation of Czar Nicholas II, Li and Count Witte signed an agreement allowing Russia railroad rights through Mongolia and Manchuria. Li was again criticized for ceding Chinese territory, and rumors circulated that he had accepted a huge bribe.

Reform and Industry

Perhaps even more significant than his military and political service was Li Hongzhang’s contributions to China’s self-strengthening. In 1872 he created the China Merchant Steam Navigation Company, one of the era’s most successful government-private joint enterprises, which proved highly effective in competition with foreign shipping firms. In 1878 he constructed a modern textile factory in Shanghai to counter increased foreign imports. In order to improve communications, he built a national network...
telegraph line that linked China’s major cities and connected Chinese officials and businessmen to the world via the international telegraph cable. He was also instrumental in promoting the use of railroads, building one of the first to facilitate the transportation of coal from the Kaiping mines.

Li believed that a strong state needs a strong military. In the 1880s he established arsenals in Tianjin to produce ammunition for the army’s imported rifles and purchased modern gunboats for his northern fleet stationed at Weihaiwei in Shandong Province. He sent promising naval students to Europe for training and invited foreign experts to teach at his new Tianjin Naval Academy. By 1882 Li’s northern fleet consisted of twelve formidable gunboats and cruisers staffed by Western-trained officers and engineers, and the combined navies of the country now included fifty steam warships—half of which were constructed in Chinese shipyards.

Implications

In the early 1890s Li Hongzhang reached the apex of his career. On his seventieth birthday in 1892 he was showered with gifts by the emperor and empress dowager, honoring his contributions to China’s stability and modernization. However, despite his success in implementing self-strengthening programs in technology and defense, China proved no match in conflicts with European or Japanese troops. Military defeats and the humiliating stipulations of the Treaty of Shimonoseki cast a shadow over his career, and bribery claims associated with the Russian railroad lease through northern China further clouded his legacy. He died of illness just two months after concluding negotiations with foreign powers over the Boxer Rebellion.

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Further Reading