One of the most important of the “unequal treaties,” the Treaty of Tianjin developed as an outcome of the Second Opium War (1856–1860) and greatly expanded foreign rights and foreign control over the China coast.

The Treaty of Tianjin, signed in June 1858, was the chief diplomatic outcome of the Second Opium War (1856–1860, also called the Arrow War). Actually four separate Tianjin treaties were written with England, France, United States, and Russia. The British were the main force behind the war and the treaties. Lord Elgin, high commissioner to China, had been sent to China to force the Chinese government to agree to an expansion of foreign rights and to honor rights granted in the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), especially the right to trade in Guangzhou (Canton). For Elgin the most important rights were the right of residence for foreign ministers in Beijing and the right of Britain and the other powers to conduct relations with China on the Western model of diplomatic equality rather than as part of the Chinese tribute system (the traditional method of dealing with foreign relations).

Elgin was particularly concerned that China be willing to permanently accept whatever agreement was reached, which led him both to ignore some of the broader demands of British merchants in China and to be willing to use force to impress the Chinese court with the necessity of coming to a permanent accommodation with the foreigners.

After initial fighting around Guangzhou, a joint Anglo-French expedition sailed north and seized the Dagu forts and forced the negotiations that led to the Treaty of Tianjin. The treaty expanded the number of treaty ports—ports open to foreign trade and residence—from five to sixteen and opened the Yangzi (Chang) River to foreign navigation. The treaty also was to make travel outside the treaty ports easier for foreigners. The British and French each were to receive a large indemnity, which was to be guaranteed by the revenues of Chinese Customs. Foreign legations also were to be established in Beijing.

The Chinese court was unhappy with the treaty even after it was agreed to. Although officials in charge of dealing with the foreigners were convinced that China had no option but to accept the terms, the Xianfeng emperor (reigned 1851–1861) was convinced by more conservative advisors that diplomatic equality in particular could not be granted. The British fleet coming to exchange the final ratification of the treaty was driven off when it attempted to force a passage at the Dagu forts in June 1859, and the court took advantage of this unexpected victory to abrogate the treaty. A large Anglo-French force was sent to Tianjin in the summer of 1860. The foreign troops defeated the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) armies, and the emperor was forced to flee Beijing. The foreigners burned the imperial Summer Palace outside Beijing in retaliation for the killing of foreign prisoners, and the Qing court was forced to accept the terms of the treaty.

The Treaty of Tianjin, along with the end of the Taiping Rebellion, ushered in an era of rapid growth of foreign influence on the China coast. Foreign economic activity increased, and the number and geographical spread of
China’s Unequal Treaties

For the Qing dynasty, the signing of the Treaty of Tianjin was merely an expedient to get the foreigners to withdraw troops threatening Beijing. But waiving foreign taxation in exchange for the abandonment of the aggressors’ other demands proved to be merely an illusion that “failed to move the barbarian chieftains.” The imperial negotiators even tried to convince Emperor Xianfeng that signed treaties were not binding. One of the Chinese negotiators, Gui Liang, wrote:

At present, the treaties of peace with Britain and France cannot be taken as real. These few sheets of paper [the treaties] are simply a means to get foreign troops and warships to leave the coast [of Tianjin]. In the future, if Your Majesty desires to break these agreements and the peace, Your Majesty needs only to punish your slave [Gui Liang] for mismanagement. [Those treaties] can henceforth be treated as rubbish.


foreign missionaries, merchants, and military forces grew. The Treaty of Tianjin fully established the treaty port system. Although the treaty did not explicitly legalize opium, the Qing court did legalize domestic opium production in the aftermath of the treaty. After the treaty China also established the Zongli Yamen (the equivalent of a modern foreign ministry) to deal with diplomatic relations with Westerners and began its program of self-strengthening to begin borrowing foreign technology.

Alan BAUMLER

Further Reading

