

Prologue

*“Travellers assure us that the Chinese have peace without happiness, industry without improvement, stability without strength, and public order without public morality. The condition of society is always tolerable, never excellent. I am convinced that, when China is opened to European observation, it will be found to contain the most perfect model of a central administration which exists in the universe.”*¹

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835

Historical Turning Points in Diplomatic History of the Modern World

In the 1640s, two separate seminal events occurred in East Asia and Western Europe, turning out to be decisive junctures that affected the future historical development of international relations in their respective regions. In East Asia, the ethnic Manchus from Northeast Asia entered into the south of the Shanhaiguan Pass and conquered Beijing in 1644, officially marking the end of the Ming and the beginning of the Qing in Chinese dynastic period of history. Meanwhile, in Western Europe, the European states concluded the peace settlements in the Westphalian towns of Osnabrück and Münster in 1648, ending the destructive Thirty Years’ War in the Holy Roman Empire and the Eighty Years’ War between Habsburg Spain and the Dutch Republic. These two unrelated yet significant events took place in the same historical period, at the eastern and western ends of Eurasia, determining the historical evolution of the two civilisations towards different directions over the following two hundred years.

After the founding of the Qing dynasty, the Manchu ruling elites vigorously absorbed Han Chinese culture and inherited the Confucian model of statecraft and foreign relations. In doing so, the ethnic Manchus eventually created arguably one of the greatest dynasties in Chinese history. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Qing dynasty had experienced long glorious and prosperous ages during the

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Translated by Henry Reeve, Vol. 1, (Reprint, New York: Colonial Press, 1899), 89.

imperial reigns of Kangxi (康熙) (r. 1662-1722), Yongzheng (雍正) (r. 1723-1735) and Qianlong (乾隆) (r. 1736-1795), making it the last golden era of imperial China. Chinese historians commonly refer to this Qing heydays as *Kang-Qian Shengshi* (康乾盛世), while Western historians describe it as the “High Qing era”.²

Before the mid-nineteenth century, the prosperity and strength of the Qing Empire maintained the Chinese dominance in the East Asian world order. This model of the international system persisted for approximately 2,000 years in East Asian history and was characterised by a deeply rooted authoritarian nature and a hierarchical relationship based on the Confucian ideology of Sino-centrism. In this world order, small and neighbouring states were regularly expected to pay tribute to the Celestial Empire as a sign of their submission and recognition of Chinese dominance. Western historians tended to refer to this pre-modern Confucian model of international relations mechanism in East Asia as the “tributary system”.³ In terms of traditional Chinese foreign relations, the tributary system reached its peak by the early nineteenth century owing to the success of the Confucian statecraft during the High Qing era.

In contrast to the East Asian system, the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia by the European states reshaped the European model of international relations and marked a groundbreaking step in launching the modern approach of European diplomacy. In the new mechanism of international relations, the medieval structure of the Christian universalism was collapsed. The emerging Westphalian system, with the invention of new concepts such as nations states, sovereignty and legal equality of states, became the fundamental principles of international law and diplomacy, dominating European

² See: Klaus Mühlhahn, *Making China Modern: From the Great Qing to Xi Jinping*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), 25-84; William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 63-89.

³ The concept of “tribute system” has long dominated the Western scholarship’s understanding of imperial China’s foreign relations and pre-modern East Asian world order. The term was initially coined by American historian John King Fairbank in the 1940s. However, this concept has faced continuous challenges from historians since the late 1980s when attempting to comprehend the Qing Empire’s relations with Inner Asian tribes, particularly during the process of the Manchu expansion into these regions. See: J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Têng, “On the Ch’ing (Qing) Tributary System”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1941): 135-246; James A. Millward, “Sinicisation, the Tribute System and Dynasties: Three Concepts to Justify Colonialism and Attack non-Sinitic Diversity in the People’s Republic of China”, *Istituto Affari Internazionali Papers*, July 2023.

foreign affairs for the next three centuries. Moreover, the functioning of this new type of system encouraged individual states to pursue their own national interests as the ultimate goal, which resulted in balance of power diplomacy turning out to be an inevitability for organising international relations, aimed at preventing any single state from questing for supremacy. Although the Westphalian system was unable to bring an end to future conflicts in Europe, it set the precedent for peace settlements to be negotiated and compromised on the basis of the principles of international law through diplomatic conferences.

Since the mid-seventeenth century, the principles of the Westphalian system were further strengthened in Europe during the Age of Enlightenment. In this momentous intellectual and philosophical movement, a set of core ideas that focused on democratic values and institutions, such as liberty, equality, individualism, humanism, progress, the rule of law and separation of powers, profoundly promoted the political modernisation and laid the foundation for transforming the Western world from medieval obscurantist societies into modern democratic states. Similarly, these Enlightenment ideas were applicable to the development of international affairs in Europe. As Henry Kissinger, the German-born American historian and former U.S. top diplomat, expounded in his book *Diplomacy* that the operational dynamics of the modern European state system found intellectual resonance in the ideas of Enlightenment philosophers. Notably, concepts like Adam Smith's notion of the economic invisible hand and Montesquieu's principles of separation of powers and checks and balances were pivotal. This was encapsulated in his argument that "By pursuing its own selfish interests, each state was presumed to contribute to progress, as if some unseen hands were guaranteeing that freedom of choice for each state assured well-being for all."⁴

In addition, the intellectual achievements of the Enlightenment inspired scientific and technological development, which aided the European states in overcoming geographical hurdles and facilitated their global expansion for wealth. During this process, the modern European model of diplomacy, founded on the Westphalian

⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 21-22.

principles, was disseminated to other parts of the world. However, prior to the nineteenth century, European attempts to apply Westphalian principles in their relations with China encountered obstacles. The epitome of the European diplomatic setback was highlighted in the event of the Macartney Embassy to the Qing dynasty in 1793.

Benefiting from the ongoing Industrial Revolution, Great Britain, as the most dominant commercial and naval power of the Western world, embarked on a significant endeavour. They dispatched the first-ever formal diplomatic mission to the Qing dynasty, introducing newly developed scientific products and striving to establish bilateral commercial and diplomatic connections on the foundation of the principle of sovereign equality. However, the British envoy led by Lord George Macartney was perceived by the Chinese as no different from other “barbarians” who sought to pay tribute and demonstrate subordination to the Qing Emperor within the traditional Chinese world order. In light of the Confucian understanding of the hierarchical international system grounded in Chinese cultural superiority, Emperor Qianlong viewed the British requests for equal trade and diplomatic relations as arrogant and offensive behaviours. The obscurantist nature of the Confucian way of pride and prejudice naturally led the Qing ruling elites to overlook the progressive modern scientific and technological achievements of the Western world. But on the other hand, since the British proposals aligned with the modern Western standards that had been practiced by Europeans in diplomatic engagement for over a century, the British similarly found it offensive not to be treated on an equal basis within the Chinese hierarchical world order.

In this encounter between the Chinese and the Western civilisations, both sides harboured significant misunderstandings in their perceptions and cognitions of each other’s diplomatic behaviours. As examined by American historian James Hevia, a clear conflict between the two sides revolved around the Confucian protocol of ritual performance (礼, or *li*), with the central dispute concerning the so-called “kowtow question” (叩头, or *koutou*), in which the British delegations were required to kneel three times and bow their heads to the ground thrice as an acknowledgment of the supremacy

of the Chinese emperor.⁵ The act of performing the kowtow held significant symbolism within the universal hierarchical structure of China's *ancien régime*. This structure was applicable not only to domestic political governance but also extended to foreign relations. Given that the Confucian formality fundamentally contradicted the modern Westphalian principles of sovereign equality, a clash of diplomatic models became inevitable between the two powers.

The Macartney Embassy served as a symbolic event that unfolded the early disputes over the standards of international conduct between the traditional Chinese system and the modern Westphalian model. By this juncture, China and Europe had each cultivated their own part of glorious history under the different types of system since the 1640s. The Manchu dynasty had already ascended to the pinnacle of its golden age, representing the highest stage of development within an agrarian civilisation and imperial despotism by adhering to the *ancien régime* of China. However, the triumph of Confucian statecraft, along with its obscurantist nature, had led Qing China to overlook the ongoing remarkable transformation taking place beyond its conventional sphere of influence in East Asia. As a result, Qing China rejected the global trend of aspiring for modernisation during this historical stage and persisted in its self-contained isolationism, as well as maintaining the traditional assumption of Chinese supremacy in foreign relations.

Yet, in the meantime, the leading European states were progressively evolving into modern industrial and democratic states, propelling Western civilisation into an advanced stage of human development. Although, at this historical juncture, British power had not yet managed to challenge Chinese superiority within the East Asian international system, a burgeoning industrial Britain gleaned insight into the backwardness and vulnerabilities of agrarian China through this official visit. From this historical turning point onward, the global balance of power underwent a dramatic shift toward Western Europe.

From a wider historical perspective, the Qing-British disputes arising from the

⁵ James Louis Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 9; 159-166.

Macartney Mission could also be seen as a pivotal juncture in the evolution of the foreign relations between China and the modern Western states. The impending crisis between China and the Western powers over the differing diplomatic mechanisms loomed as an outcome of this engagement. As the French historian and politician Alain Peyrefitte concluded: “In England the results of the mission had dispelled illusions. If China was determined to remain sealed, then the doors had to be battered down.”⁶ Evidently, Britain’s military determination and China’s ignorance would inevitably lead to large-scale conflicts between a modern industrial power and a backward agrarian society inevitable. The outcome of the civilisational clash seemed destined to impose the most profound strains on China’s *ancien régime* in its long history.

The military confrontation between industrial Britain and agrarian China eventually broke out in 1840 in the name of free trade. This historical event, known as the First Opium War, is typically viewed by historians as the starting point of modern Chinese history. Qing China’s defeat produced a domino effect, triggering the gradual collapse of the traditional Chinese world order and initiating a century-long period of domestic turmoil and foreign subjugation. Concurrently, Great Britain imposed a Westphalian framework of international relations and introduced modern Western civilisation to China. Nevertheless, China’s path to modernisation was an arduous process. One of the major obstacles it encountered was its ideological reluctance to embrace the modern Western political, institutional, economic and scientific progress. China’s resistance to the progressive Western industrial civilisation eventually turned out to be a prominent struggle between China and the Western powers throughout the process of its early modernisation and integration into the Westphalian international system from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century.

In reviewing China’s diplomatic encounters with the Western world in this historical period, Henry Kissinger noted that Chinese Confucian elites perceived the introduction of Western civilisation as “endangering China’s cultural essence and social order”, and accordingly, they predominantly employed traditional diplomatic methods

⁶ Alain Peyrefitte, *The Immobile Empire*, Translated by Alfred A. Knopf, (Reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 2013), xxii.

to address the escalating challenges posed by foreign powers.⁷ In contrast, according to Jiang Tingfu (蒋廷黻, or T. F. Tsiang), a prominent early twentieth-century Chinese historian and former top diplomat of the Nationalist government (1928-1949), the late Qing political elites were products and representatives of China's thousand-year-old traditional culture. However, their unwavering commitment and fixation on this old culture failed to resolve China's diplomatic crises in this period, highlighting the shortcomings of China's traditional culture within the modernisation process.⁸

Given that both Kissinger and Jiang Tingfu have cultivated expertise in both the academic and diplomatic arenas of their respective countries, their distinct insights offer the valuable advantage of synthesising theoretical knowledge from academia with practical diplomatic experience to understand Chinese diplomatic history and foreign relations. In this sense, the remarks of these two renowned historians and diplomats underscore that the traditional Chinese thinking and cultural knowledge served as crucial theoretical bases in shaping the direction of China's modern diplomatic trajectory. However, they also highlight that the validity of these theories, in turn, presented a significant impediment to China's initial efforts at modernisation, transition, and integration into the modern world system. Therefore, any effort to comprehend the logic behind China's diplomatic decision-making and conduct in its modern history necessitates an investigation into the important sources of China's traditional cultural traits and its ancient trajectory.

⁷ Henry Kissinger, *On China*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 59.

⁸ Jiang Tingfu 蒋廷黻 (eds), *Jindai Zhongguo Waijiaoshi Ziliao Jiyao* 近代中国外交史资料辑要 (Materials of Modern Chinese Diplomatic History) (hereafter *JZWZJ*), Vol. 2, (Reprint, Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe, 2014), 2-3.

Introduction

Research Inspiration and Discussion on a Selective Historiography

As the founder of the study of modern Chinese diplomatic history, when Jiang Tingfu conducted the compilation and editing of the first-ever modern Chinese diplomatic archives in the 1930s, he introduced a research direction focused on the interplay between a state's diplomacy and its cultural traditions.⁹ In his view, studying Chinese diplomatic history from the perspective of its cultural traits was an essential subject that merited in-depth exploration, as it would enrich the study of diplomatic history, which often centred on international negotiations and the exchange of diplomatic notes.¹⁰ Although the complete compilation of this groundbreaking work was left unfinished after he joined the diplomatic service for the Republic of China (1912-1949), his efforts nonetheless served as the cornerstone and provided inspiration for the nascent discipline of modern Chinese diplomatic history in academia.

Notwithstanding Jiang Tingfu proposed this research direction in the field of Chinese diplomatic history in the early 1930s, does it imply that relevant studies have become outdated in contemporary scholarship? In reality, integrating an understanding of the distinct Confucian-based cultural traits into the examination of Chinese foreign affairs has consistently intrigued and engaged Chinese and Western historians and political scientists over the past century. These intellectuals constantly make new interpretations over different decades in light of the ups and downs of China's diplomatic ties with the Western states and the ongoing release of the newly available historical documents and archives.

Some notable examples in academic scholarship need to be highlighted. Following a brief mentorship under Jiang Tingfu in the early 1930s, the distinguished American historian John King Fairbank emerged as a trailblazer in the field of China Studies in the United States from the 1940s to the 1970s.¹¹ Many of his works concerning Chinese

⁹ Ibid., 3-4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ John King Fairbank, *Chinabound: A Fifty-Year Memoir*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 85-93.

diplomatic history sought to explore China's traditional diplomatic practices through the lens of its distinctive cultural characteristics. Most notably, he invented the theory of "Tributary System" in traditional Chinese diplomacy based on the aspect of the Confucian virtue of *li* (禮) or "ritual", wherein tribute served as a prevalent form of ritual practice among neighbouring Asian countries to exhibit their political submission to the imperial Chinese dynasties.¹²

In addition, in the 1990s, new theories emerged in Western scholarship in light of the evolving world order following the end of the Cold War. A prominent example is found in American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington's theory of "the clash of civilisations", in which he offered a wider global framework to view China's distinct civilisational model that might potentially turn into a challenge to the post-Cold War global order.¹³ According to his analyses, as one of the world's major civilisations, China would increasingly assert the validity of its traditional Confucian values and institutions over the Western model of civilisation, driven by its growing economic development. This trend could intensify the clash between Chinese and American civilisations, as the sources of conflict fundamentally stemmed from societal and cultural differences. He further argued that, because basic Confucian values—such as authority, hierarchy, the subordination of individual rights and interests, the importance of consensus, the avoidance of confrontation, "saving face", and the supremacy of the state over society and of society over the individual—are inherently distinct from core American beliefs in liberty, equality, democracy, individualism, opposition to authority, and checks and balances of power, conflicts over the legitimacy of values and institutions are likely to arise.¹⁴

Furthermore, in the historical context of China's rise in global affairs in the early twentieth-first century, one of the biggest challenges that both China and the world

¹² See: John King Fairbank, Ta-tuan Ch'en et al (eds), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); John King Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842–1854*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953); J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. T'eng, "On the Ch'ing (Qing) Tributary System", 135–246.

¹³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 168–174; 218–238.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 224–225.

community need to address is how China should approach to the existing global order, and conversely how the rest of the world should respond to China's growing role in international affairs. In view of this, Henry Kissinger, who once made remarkable contributions to the rapprochement between the United States and the People's Republic of China during the 1970s, completed the book *On China* in 2011. In this book, Kissinger offered his insight views on China's foreign affairs through a broader historical perspective, drawing upon his first-hand knowledge in diplomacy with Chinese leaders. An underlying approach in this writing was his analysis of how the integral components of China's historical experiences and cultural traditions shaped contemporary China's diplomatic decision-making and behaviours in a conceptual manner. He emphasised that the peculiar model of China's history and culture occasionally leads the Chinese to develop divergent understandings from those of Americans when examining the functioning of international relations. While there is divergence of opinion regarding China's diplomatic approach, it is imperative to enrich the understanding of China's diplomatic behaviours and patterns by tracing the roots of its ancient past, as its historical and cultural legacies will influence how China conducts its diplomacy and engages in global affairs in the twenty-first century.¹⁵

In light of his diplomatic engagements and observations with Chinese leaders, Kissinger wrote: "In no other country is it conceivable that a modern leader would initiate a major national undertaking by invoking strategic principles from a millennium-old event.....No other country can claim so long a continuous civilisation, or such an intimate link to its ancient past and classical principles of strategy and statesmanship."¹⁶ This was because in Chinese society, "the traditional cosmology endured despite catastrophes and centuries-long periods of political decay", and therefore, "any attempt to understand China's twentieth-century diplomacy or its twenty-first century world role must begin.....with a basic appreciation of the traditional context."¹⁷

¹⁵ Kissinger, *On China*, xv-xvi.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.