

Looking for a Friend:  
Sino-U.S. Relations and Ulysses S. Grant's Mediation in the  
Ryukyu/Liuqiu 琉球 Dispute of 1879

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the  
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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2014

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## Abstract

In March 1879, Japan announced the end of the Ryukyu (Liuqiu) Kingdom and the establishment of Okinawa Prefecture in its place. For the previous 250 years, Ryukyu had been a quasi-independent tribute-sending state to Japan and China. Following the arrival of Western imperialism to East Asia in the 19th century, Japan reacted to the changing international situation by adopting Western legal standards and clarifying its borders in frontier areas such as the Ryukyu Islands.

China protested Japanese actions in Ryukyu, though Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) leaders were not willing to go to war over the islands. Instead, Qing leaders such as Li Hongzhang (1823-1901) and Prince Gong (1833-1898) sought to resolve the dispute through diplomatic means, including appeals to international law, rousing global public opinion against Japan, and, most significantly, requesting the mediation of the United States and former U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885). Initially, China hoped Grant's mediation would lead to a restoration of the previous arrangement of Ryukyu being a dually subordinate kingdom to China and Japan. In later negotiations, China sought a three-way division of the islands among China, Japan, and Ryukyu. Japan was opposed to allowing the Ryukyus to revert to their previous status, but after Grant's involvement proved willing to negotiate a compromise.

This thesis argues that Qing China, possessing few other viable diplomatic strategies, looked to the United States and Grant to mediate the Ryukyu dispute because key leaders such as Li Hongzhang and Prince Gong perceived the United States to be a less aggressive, more "friendly" Western power with whom China could possibly align in its effort to stave off the loss of its tributaries on the frontiers of the Qing Empire. In addition to answering *why* China looked to Grant and the United States as a potentially favorable mediator in the dispute, this thesis also looks at *how* China approached Grant in requesting assistance – namely, by emphasizing the dispute's legal and economic aspects.

Though scholars often allude to the Qing's perception of the United States as a more friendly imperialist power in the 19th century, such statements are usually skimmed over with relatively little analysis as to why that was the case. In answering why China looked to the United States, the request for Grant's mediation in the Ryukyu dispute provides a window through which to view Chinese perceptions of the United States more fully. The United States, though enjoying the advantages of the unequal treaties, had not been an active aggressor against China in the Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860). Furthermore, the actions of several influential American individuals, including Anson Burlingame (1820-1870) and William Pethick (d. 1901), perhaps colored Qing leaders' perceptions regarding the possibility of the United States as a reliable diplomatic partner. Grant also had a positive reputation among Chinese leaders.

This study also looks at U.S. perceptions of China and Japan. Some U.S. leaders thought aligning with China could procure significant advantages for future U.S. interests in East Asia. The official policy, however, was to maintain strict neutrality.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to recognize and thank three groups of individuals who contributed to this thesis. First, I need to thank my advisor, Christopher A. Reed, for his guidance throughout my time at The Ohio State University. His insight, encouragement, and feedback have contributed greatly to my academic development these past two academic years. I would also like to thank the other members of my thesis committee, Ying Zhang and Robert J. McMahon, for the time and effort they have put into reviewing this thesis.

I also should acknowledge several of my fellow graduate students here at OSU. Austin Dean has been a valuable academic companion who has “shown me the ropes” quite a few times, whether related to academic matters or finding the best cafeterias at Tsinghua University in Beijing. Luo Di offered feedback on a few of my rough translations of classical Chinese in this thesis (the ones that are still rough are all my fault). Deidryn Duncan has been very patient with my questions about the East Asian Studies program throughout my time at OSU.

Last, but certainly not least, I must acknowledge my family. The biggest thanks goes to my wife Mallie, who has been a patient and loving source of encouragement throughout this process. She has never complained about the extra load put on her by my academic pursuits. Our children, Jack and Isabella, have been joyful reminders of what is truly important and welcome respites during some of the long days of study and research.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

General Grant finds himself burdened with unexpected questions in relation to Eastern policy. During his visit to North China, both Prince Kung and the Viceroy (Li) Hung Chang laid before him their views of the Loochoo (Ryukyu) controversy, asking him to use his influence with Japan to prevent a serious misunderstanding between the two Empires.<sup>1</sup>

– *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 25, 1879

On March 27, 1879, Japanese official Matsuda Michiyuki (1839-1882) informed the king of the Ryukyu Kingdom 琉球國 of Tokyo's decision to end the monarchy.<sup>2</sup> Four days later, Sho Tai 尚泰 (1843-1901), the last king of Ryukyu, left his castle in the capital of Shuri and prepared for exile in Japan. The castle was immediately occupied by Japanese troops. The Ryukyu Kingdom was dissolved. Okinawa Prefecture was established in its place.

The events of March 1879 completed the process of Ryukyu's assimilation into Japan that had begun in 1872.<sup>3</sup> Ryukyu was a reluctant participant. For the previous 250 years, Ryukyu had occupied an ambiguous status in East Asia. Though in some ways an independent kingdom, Ryukyu was also a dually subordinate tribute-sending nation to

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<sup>1</sup> "General Grant in Yokohama – His Duties as Arbitrator," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 25, 1879. This news brief, though published later, is originally dated to July 29, 1879. It seems likely that the author was John Russell Young (1840-1899), an American journalist and Grant's secretary on the trip, but no byline is given.

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, I will use the spelling of the islands (Ryukyu) found on present-day maps, which is also reflective of the spelling used in the most recent scholarship. The Pinyin of the characters 琉球, however, is Liuqiu. In older documents, the name of the islands may take on any number of transliterations with Lew Chew, Loo Choo, and Liu Kiu being some of the most common.

<sup>3</sup> This process is sometimes referred to as the Ryukyu *shobun* 琉球処分, or the "disposal of Ryukyu." (See Gregory Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Ideology in Early-Modern Thought and Politics* [Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999], 143.) On the Chinese side, there is no consistent term applied to the loss of Ryukyu. Prior to Grant's arrival, several memorials mention Japan "blocking" Ryukyu's tribute to China (*gengzu rugong* 梗阻入貢), in reference to Japan blocking Ryukyu's tribute missions to China in 1877. In the Spring of 1879, Li Hongzhang writes twice of Japan abolishing, or deposing (*fei* 廢), Ryukyu in the months prior. Most of the communications regarding Grant's help simply refer to the issue as "*Liuqiu shi*" 琉球事 – "the Ryukyu matter."



China and Japan. By 1879, however, those days were over. In Japan's eyes, the China-centric East Asian tribute system was no longer tenable in view of the changing geopolitical situation triggered by the arrival of Western imperial powers to the region. In an effort to clarify its borders, Japan responded by claiming territory in places like the Sakhalin Peninsula and Ryukyu Islands.

Annexing Ryukyu brought protests from China's Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). In the wake of the Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860), China had already ceded territory and signed a series of unequal treaties with the Western powers. Qing leaders such as Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823-1901) were not willing to see Ryukyu taken by Japan without a fight. But "fight" in this case did not mean a shooting war. Instead, the Qing explored a diplomatic solution to the problem. The Qing leaders' strategy was multi-faceted, but most prominently included calling on the United States and former U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885) to negotiate a solution to the Ryukyu dispute.

Near the end of a two-year world tour following the end of his presidency, Grant arrived in China on May 6, 1879. To that point, Grant was the highest profile Western political figure ever to visit China. As a former President of the United States and the victorious commanding general in the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865), Grant received a warm welcome from the Qing government. More important than diplomatic fanfare, however, was that Grant's visit presented China with what Qing leaders saw as a golden opportunity to resolve the pressing diplomatic crisis between China and Japan over the Ryukyus' status.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ulysses Simpson Grant, "Conversation with Prince Kung, Beijing, June 8, 1879," in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed. John Y. Simon, vol. 29 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2008), 152. (hereafter, Grant Papers)

This thesis employs the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Ryukyu Islands in 1879 to analyze Sino-U.S. relations at the time, specifically looking at how Chinese and American leaders' perceptions of the other country impacted the diplomatic relationship. I argue that Qing China, possessing few other viable diplomatic strategies, looked to the United States and Grant to mediate the Ryukyu dispute because key leaders such as Li Hongzhang and Prince Gong 恭親王 (1833-1898) perceived the United States to be a less aggressive, more "friendly" Western power with whom China could possibly align in its effort to stave off the loss of its tributaries on the frontiers of the Qing Empire. Grant, in particular, seemed like a powerful choice to mediate the dispute with Japan. His political and military achievements warranted immediate respect from leaders on both sides of the dispute. In addition, Grant's purported anti-imperialist reputation might have signaled a favorable view of the Chinese argument in the Ryukyu case.

In examining China's perception of the United States and Grant, this thesis also looks at how Qing leaders sought to bring diplomatic pressure on Japan, which is reflected in how Li Hongzhang and Prince Gong pitched the case to Grant while visiting Tianjin and Beijing in May and June 1879. China's key talking points revolved around appeals to international law and the effects on commerce that Japan's seizing of Ryukyu – and the possible war between China and Japan that could ensue – might have. By focusing on these issues, Qing leaders hoped to arouse Grant's sympathy and interest in China's side of the case. If successful in acquiring Grant's assistance, Li and Gong hoped Grant's international stature could pressure Japan into a favorable resolution for China. Up to this point, Japan had rebuffed Qing efforts to address Ryukyu's status. In a conversation with Grant in early June 1879, Gong said he hoped Japan would restore the

Ryukyu king to the throne, withdraw its garrison of troops, and not claim sovereignty over the islands.<sup>5</sup> With Grant's intervention, Li and Gong thought such an outcome was possible.

If Qing leaders viewed the United States as the most palatable of the Western powers, it is certain that Americans, based on their own proclamations, did so as well. Some American diplomats in China saw their country as a beacon of anti-imperialism, alone among the Western powers in its benevolent stance toward the Qing dynasty. Shortly after leaving China in June 1879, Grant shared such an opinion in a letter to Adam Badeau (1831-1895), his former assistant in the Civil War and then U.S. Consul in London: "The fact is Chinese like Americans better, or rather perhaps hate them less, than any other foreigners. The reason is palpable. We are the only power that recognizes their right to control their own internal affairs."<sup>6</sup>

Though many have noted the hypocrisy of such statements by Americans in China (who, such statements notwithstanding, were enjoying the privileges of the unequal treaties as much as other Westerners), there was just enough evidence to offer some credence to the claims. Facing ever more threatening diplomatic crises on China's frontiers, some (not all) Qing leaders did indeed look at the United States as a more approachable Western power, as will be seen in the Ryukyu dispute. They based this perception on the fact that the United States had not been an open or declared aggressor in the Opium Wars. In addition, the actions of certain influential American diplomats who demonstrated pro-China sympathies, such as Anson Burlingame (1820-1870) and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>6</sup> "To Adam Badeau," June 22, 1879, Grant Papers 29:171.

William Pethick (d. 1901), supported the belief that the United States could be a reliable diplomatic mediator for China.

### **1.1 Historiography of the Ryukyu Crisis and Early Sino-U.S. Relations**

Grant's mediation in the Sino-Japanese dispute over Ryukyu has not been extensively analyzed by scholars. In a 1979 paper, Edwin Pak-wah Leung offers what he calls the "first comprehensive study" of Grant's mediation in the dispute over Ryukyu.<sup>7</sup> His paper covers the basic narrative of Grant's discussions with Chinese and Japanese officials in order to provide insight into Sino-Japanese relations and the Qing's weakened position in the international arena.

In a chapter written later for a book of essays titled *Li Hung-chang and China's Early Modernization*,<sup>8</sup> Leung focuses on Li Hongzhang's role in the Ryukyu controversy. Leung shows that, in the early 1870s, Li had hoped for a Sino-Japanese alliance, but those hopes were dashed when it became apparent that Japan would not be a willing partner, as seen in Japan's aggressive actions in Ryukyu. Li then looked for other possible allies. Leung raises the possibility that Li considered Russia, with whom China was settling a territorial dispute in the Ili Valley in Northwest China at the time, as a nearby counterweight to Japan's rising threat.<sup>9</sup>

In a May 1949 article written for the *Pacific Historical Review*, Hyman Kublin uses the Ryukyu controversy to demonstrate the Qing's ineffective response to the

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<sup>7</sup> Edwin Pak-Wah Leung, "General Ulysses S. Grant and the Sino-Japanese Dispute over the Ryukyu (Liu-ch'iu) Islands," *Proceedings of the First International Symposium on Asian Studies, 1979*, vol. 2 (Hong Kong: Asian Research Service, 1979), 421.

<sup>8</sup> The spelling of Li Hongzhang's name in the Wade-Giles romanization system for Chinese is Li Hung-chang. Most present-day scholarship uses the Pinyin system, however.

<sup>9</sup> Edwin Pak-Wah Leung, "Li Hung-chang and the Liu Ch'iu (Ryukyu) Controversy, 1871-1881," in *Li Hung-chang and China's Early Modernization*, ed. Samuel C. Chu and Kwang-Ching Liu (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994).

changing international situation at the time, namely, the arrival of the imperial powers and dissolution of the China-centric tribute system. Kublin compares the Chinese response against Japan's rapid adoption of Western legal concepts and the building of a modern military.<sup>10</sup> Kublin argues that Qing officials, including Li Hongzhang, were generally oblivious to Japan's aims in Ryukyu throughout the decade of the 1870s. Kublin writes that it was not until Ryukyu's tribute mission was officially stopped by Japan in 1877 that China realized the seriousness of Japanese encroachments in the tributary.<sup>11</sup> Kublin devotes a couple of pages to Grant's mediation as part of the narrative of China "losing" Ryukyu.

These articles all narrate the details of the Ryukyu controversy in the 1870s and make arguments related to how the incident shows a weakening Qing Dynasty, but none delves deeply into the significance of Grant's mediation on Sino-U.S. relations. Michael Hunt has begun to remedy that omission by devoting a section of his chapter, "The United States in Li Hung-chang's Foreign Policy, 1879-1895," to Grant's efforts in the Ryukyu dispute. Hunt points out that Li actually tried to employ American intermediaries in four different diplomatic crises between 1879-1895: the Ryukyu Crisis (1879), the Sino-French War (1884-1885), the negotiation of the first U.S. treaty with Korea (1880-1882), and the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895).<sup>12</sup> Hunt covers the basics of Grant's negotiations while also touching on Grant's reference to the Chinese immigration issue in mediating the dispute. According to Hunt, Li's pursuit of American mediation was doomed to fail due to the United States' official policy of neutrality as well as American

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<sup>10</sup> Hyman Kublin, "The Attitude of China during the Liu-ch'iu Controversy, 1871-1881," *Pacific Historical Review* 18, no. 2 (May 1949), 215-216.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>12</sup> Michael H. Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 115-142.

views of Japan as “the most hopeful local champion of a progressive East Asia free of European interference and control.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Historiography of Early Sino-U.S. Relations**

Hunt’s chapter is part of his award-winning book, *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914*, on the early history of Sino-U.S. relations. Hunt chastises the view that China and the United States had a “special” relationship in a wholly positive sense in the 19th century. Instead, he defines the “special” relationship between the two countries as being “notable for its breadth, complexity, and instability.”<sup>14</sup>

David Anderson’s *Imperialism and Idealism: American Diplomats in China, 1861-1898* is a helpful supplement to Hunt’s broader survey. Anderson argues that a “mixture of selfish imperialism and selfless idealism” is evident in American diplomacy in China in the latter decades of the 19th century.<sup>15</sup> While Americans often sought to press their advantages and expand their influence in China, there was also an undertone of altruism, at least in some individual cases. By analyzing biographical case studies of eight American diplomats in China, Anderson’s book also reveals the outsized impact that individuals could (and did) have on foreign policy in China at a time when long-distance communication was more difficult than the present day and East Asia was deemed to be less crucial to overall U.S. foreign policy goals than other regions.

Well-known macro surveys of Sino-U.S. relations, such as John K. Fairbank’s *The United States and China* and Warren Cohen’s *The American Response to China*, also

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., ix-xx.

<sup>15</sup> David L. Anderson, *Imperialism and Idealism: American Diplomats in China, 1861-1898* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), viii.

include some of the themes outlined in the above-mentioned works. Fairbank, for example, notes the ambivalence in America policy towards China, and a “gap between thought and reality.”<sup>16</sup> According to Fairbank, the United States tended to “talk grand and act small” in China.<sup>17</sup> As Fairbank had said in another essay, the United States often held aloft “the American example of self-determination and anti-imperialism,” yet still took advantage of the privileges granted by the unequal treaties; in the end, U.S. policy toward China in the 19th century simply followed in the footsteps of the other imperialist powers (especially Great Britain).<sup>18</sup> Recently, Dong Wang has attempted to answer Fairbank with her own comprehensive survey of Sino-U.S. relations. She claims that the United States did not simply follow Britain, but instead had an “independent and flexible” strategy in China in the 19th century. This flexibility allowed for the United States sometimes to collaborate with the Western powers (such as in matters related to the treaty ports), but at other times to strike out on its own in contrast to the Europeans.<sup>19</sup>

The Chinese perspective covered in the works mentioned tends to stress a mix of nativist fear of foreign encroachment coupled with the advance of increasingly reform-minded leaders in the Qing government. The arrival of Western imperialism in the 19th century and the internal upheaval caused by the Taiping (1850-1864) and Nien rebellions (c. 1853-1868) forced some Chinese leaders to rethink their approach. Hunt makes the contrast between more conservative elements of Qing leadership that saw contact with foreigners as “uncouth,” with those, such as Li Hongzhang, who recognized such contact

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<sup>16</sup> John King Fairbank, *The United States and China*, Fourth ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 314.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>18</sup> John K. Fairbank, “‘American China Policy’ to 1898: A Misconception,” *Pacific Historical Review* 39, no. 4 (November 1970): 411.

<sup>19</sup> Dong Wang, *The United States and China: A History from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 45.

as a necessity and were willing to consider new approaches to diplomacy.<sup>20</sup> In regards to China's perception of and policy toward the United States, while America was still considered a "barbarian" nation and often lumped together with other Western countries, numerous scholarly works (including the works by Hunt, Anderson, and Cohen referenced above) mention that, among Qing leaders, the United States was considered "less troublesome and more peaceable" when compared to the other Western powers.<sup>21</sup> Although there seems to be some consensus around this view, it often comes with a caveat and usually downplays the possibility that such a view may have really impacted certain diplomatic interactions between China and the United States. This present thesis seeks to evaluate seriously statements that reflect a "lean" toward the United States by some influential leaders in the Chinese government.

This thesis builds on the works covering the Ryukyu crisis, especially Hunt's, but goes into more detail regarding what the dispute reveals about Sino-U.S. relations. In contrast to Hunt, however, this work does not focus as much on evaluating the wisdom of Li Hongzhang's decision to rely on the good offices of Grant and the United States, but instead tries to examine *why* Li and other Qing leaders thought it was a plausible strategy in dealing with Japan and *how* China approached Grant in requesting his assistance. I also examine why Grant was willing to play the role of mediator between China and Japan.

It should be noted, however, that this study is not evaluating whether Grant and the United States were worthy of such an assessment. Though the United States was not an armed participant in the Opium Wars against China,<sup>22</sup> Americans certainly benefited

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<sup>20</sup> Hunt, 115ff.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, 11. The "other Western powers" here being Great Britain, France, and Russia, in particular.

<sup>22</sup> Excepting the rogue actions of individuals like American naval commander Josiah Tatnall (1794-1871), who came to a British ship's defense in the Second Opium War (1856-1860). When explaining his actions



at China's expense from the unequal treaties signed with the Qing Empire.<sup>23</sup> Instead, this thesis argues that Qing leaders generally had a more positive image of the United States when compared with the other Western powers. The United States was viewed as the "best of a bad lot," as one historian has described.<sup>24</sup> This more positive reputation – deserved or not – informed and influenced certain diplomatic crises faced by the Qing in the latter decades of the 19th century, including the Ryukyu dispute of 1879.

## 1.2 Methods, Sources, and Outline

This study uses a narrative approach interspersed with the views of key figures in China, Japan, and the United States. As mentioned previously, much of the story centers around Li Hongzhang, as a preeminent official in China at the time, and Ulysses S. Grant, the former U.S. President who found himself at the center of the Ryukyu controversy in 1879. In representing the views of these public figures, I rely on American diplomatic communications, Grant's personal diary and letters, the memoirs of American journalist (and Grant's secretary on the trip) John Russell Young, collections of Li Hongzhang's and other Chinese leaders' writings, and a few Qing memorials related to the dispute.

This thesis falls within the fields of U.S. and Chinese diplomatic history (with a little bit of Japanese diplomatic history as well), while also necessarily touching on issues related to the countries' domestic histories (e.g. the Self-Strengthening Movement [1860-

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– which violated U.S. neutrality – Tatnall is reported to have said, "Blood is thicker than water", (Hunt 323n27).

<sup>23</sup> The term "unequal treaties" refers to the series of treaties forced on China by the Western powers beginning with the Treaty of Nanjing signed between Great Britain and China in 1842. The unequal treaties opened certain Chinese ports to foreign trade, created foreign concessions in the port cities, granted extraterritoriality to foreigners in China, and often included clauses giving most-favored nation status, meaning that whatever privileges attained by one power would be enjoyed by the others as well.

<sup>24</sup> David C. Hendrickson, *Union, Nation, or Empire: The American Debate over International Relations, 1789-1941* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 282.

1895] in China, the Chinese immigration issue in the United States, and the Meiji Restoration [1868] in Japan).<sup>25</sup> In examining the perceptions of the United States and China by certain leaders in each country, this study also incorporates biography and approaches related to perception and image in foreign policy making. As China scholar Li Hongshan has noted, “relations between the United States and China have always been shaped by image and perception.”<sup>26</sup> Li quotes Harold Isaacs, who argues in his book *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* that “policy makers are people too and, like all people, carry pictures in their heads of other people.” As such, it is inevitable that leaders’ “images, feelings, prejudices, and personality factors...get somehow cranked into the process of policy making.”<sup>27</sup> In the Ryukyu crisis, perceptions of which countries (and individuals) were threatening and which were potential allies played a major role in Qing leaders’ responses to Japanese actions. From the American side, Grant’s and other Americans’ personal views of China, Japan, and the European powers factored into how the crisis was perceived and mediated.

Following this introductory chapter, the second chapter focuses on the Sino-centric tribute system of which Ryukyu was a part and how the arrival of Western imperialism prompted different responses from Japan and China. After a brief discussion about the significance of the tributary system, the chapter covers Ryukyu’s history as a tribute-sending nation to both China and Japan in order to establish the context of the

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<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that the Ryukyu side of the story, though certainly important, will not be a central focus of this thesis. The Ryukyuans’ involvement is best covered in Gregory Smits, “The Ryukyu Shobun in East Asian and World History,” in *Ryūkyū in World History*, ed. Josef Kreiner (Bonn: Bier’sche Verlagsanstalt, 2001): 279-304.

<sup>26</sup> Li Hongshan, “Image and Perception in U.S.-China Relations,” Introduction to *Image, Perception, and the Making of U.S.-China Relations*, ed. Li Hongshan and Hong Zhaohui (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), 1-2.

<sup>27</sup> Harold R. Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India*, (1958; repr., Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1980), xxxviii.

events of the 1870s that comprise the majority of the chapter (and thesis overall). The middle part of the chapter narrates the key events of the Ryukyu *shobun* 琉球処分, the process of “disposing of Ryukyu” initiated by Japan in 1872. In light of the arrival of Western imperialism and the signing of unequal treaties (by both China and Japan), Japanese leaders felt compelled to delineate clearly their borders and be more assertive in border regions such as Ryukyu. Japan’s annexation of Ryukyu elicited protests from Chinese officials, including He Ruzhang 何如璋 (1838-1891), whose scathing letter sent to Japanese officials in 1878 resulted in Japan disregarding subsequent efforts by China to raise the issue.

The third chapter forms the heart of the argument, namely that China had valid reasons for looking to the United States, and Grant in particular, as a possible mediator between China and Japan. Having established the historical context leading to Japan’s actions in 1879, the first part of the chapter contributes to the overall thesis by revealing some of the more unique approaches employed by Qing leaders to resolve the Ryukyu dispute, including the use of international law, rousing global public opinion against Japan, and looking to the United States and Grant for mediation. Though American attitudes were often similar to the European imperialist powers’ and the United States enjoyed the privileges of imperialism bought by British and French military action, Qing leaders still perceived the United States as a friendlier nation than the other imperial powers. This image was bolstered by the actions of certain individual Americans, including Burlingame and Pethick. Grant, too, had a positive reputation in China, which made him a strong candidate in China’s eyes to help in the Ryukyu dispute.

Chapter Four is heavy on narrative detail as it covers Grant's discussions with both Chinese and Japanese officials. The discussions are illustrative of Chinese views of Ryukyu, Japan, and the United States, as well as of American attitudes towards East Asia. The chapter closes by briefly describing the failed Sino-Japanese negotiations over the Ryukyus in 1880. The final chapter (Chapter 5) summarizes the details of the story and argument while drawing some conclusions about the significance of the dispute.

### **1.3 Conclusion**

Though it is hard to say that the Ryukyu dispute between China and Japan has been overlooked, it certainly seems to have been underappreciated in historical scholarship. Part of this negligence is understandable. On the surface, the dispute looks like a relatively minor incident of an impoverished tributary that was gobbled up by Japan over China's protests. Ultimately, the spat did not result in war.<sup>28</sup> Without Grant's mediation, in fact, the end result in Ryukyu would have been the same. Ryukyu still would have become Japan's Okinawa Prefecture.

But the dispute cuts across several major themes in studying East Asia in the latter part of the 19th century: the demise of the Sino-centric tribute system, the effects of Western and Japanese imperialism in East Asia, the rising threat of Japan to China, and Qing reform efforts such as the Self-Strengthening Movement. As such, this dispute is worthy of closer examination. For the purposes of this thesis, China's handling of the dispute and Grant's mediation shed light on the enigma of Sino-U.S. relations at the time, including the power of perception and reputation and the impact that individuals and interpersonal relationships possibly had on how each side saw the relationship.

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<sup>28</sup> In contrast to China's future disputes with France and Japan over Vietnam and Korea, respectively.

## Chapter 2

### Tributary in Crisis: The Demise of the Ryukyu Kingdom and China's Response

Lew Chew is one of the outside feudatory states of our Empire, and has regularly paid tribute once every two years: the vessel bringing the tribute entering the port of Foo-chow, and the tribute bearers with the tribute being sent forward to Peking by the Provincial Treasurer...When a new king (or prince) succeeds to the throne (of Lew Chew) our Emperor sends Envoys to invest him with the title of King (or Prince)...The manners, customs and literature of the country are essentially the same as ours. They make use of our calendar and mode of designating the year.<sup>29</sup>

- He Ruzhang (1838-1891), Qing Minister to Japan, July 1878

The ritual subordination of Ryukyu *han* to the Qing court is a great problem for our *kokutai* and national sovereignty. Its abolition is based on careful consideration. Because the resistance of a single *han* is not appropriate, from now on, no matter how much it may appeal, (these appeals) will not be accepted.<sup>30</sup>

- Japan Grand Minister of State Sanjo Sanetomi (1837-1891), 1876

The Ryukyu Islands are a collection of islands dotting the sea from just north of Taiwan to the southern tip of Japan's Kagoshima Prefecture (known as Satsuma Domain until 1868). The islands' strategic location gives them a geopolitical significance that has occasionally made them a magnet for controversy. American scholar George Kerr put it well: Ryukyu "shares the fate of many frontier territories too small and too poor to attract attention in times of peace, but doomed to rise to international prominence during crises among the world powers. It lies on the western Pacific Rim, between the

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<sup>29</sup> He Ruzhang to John Bingham, memorandum, trans. Divie B. McCartee, July 24, 1878, in *American Diplomatic and Public Papers: The United States and China, 1861-1893, Series II Sino-Japanese Relations II*, vol. 8 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources) (hereafter, ADP: SJ-II), 36-37.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Gregory Smits, "The Ryukyu Shobun in East Asian and World History," in *Ryūkyū in World History*, ed. Josef Kreiner (Bonn: Bier'sche Verlagsanstalt, 2001), 289. *Kokutai* 國體 is translated as "national sovereignty" here. *Han* 藩 is sometimes translated as "domain." It signifies a vassal state or territory.

Image 2.1 Map of the East China Sea showing the Ryukyu Islands' proximity to Taiwan, Mainland China, Korea, and Japan. (Source: "East China Sea Map," Wikimedia Commons, June 13, 2007, accessed February 20, 2014, commons.wikimedia.org)



maritime world and continental Asia. It cannot escape consequences of wars and revolutions in larger states nearby.”<sup>31</sup>

For more than 250 years, Ryukyu had – with Japan’s knowledge – maintained an ambiguous quasi-independent status as a country subordinate to both Japan and China. In the wake of the Meiji Restoration (1868), however, Japan sought to clarify Ryukyu’s legal status under what the Meiji government saw as a new international system in East

<sup>31</sup> George H. Kerr, *Okinawa, The History of an Island People*, Revised ed. (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2000), 3. Kerr wrote that statement in 1958, the decade after the Battle of Okinawa, which claimed more than 160,000 lives (including more than 60,000 Ryukyuans) as one of the last major battles of World War II.

Asia in the 1870s. Gone was the Confucian, “family style” web of relations that allowed for fluid borders and ambiguity. Instead, Japan would adopt Western legal norms and seek to set clear boundaries on its territories, even as it prepared to expand those boundaries in the decades to follow. As seen in the epigraphs at the beginning of the chapter, Chinese and Japanese perspectives of the issue were bound to clash.

This chapter covers a series of interrelated topics that reveal the dissolution of China-Ryukyu tributary relations in the wake of Western imperialism and the new threat that Japan posed to both Ryukyu and China in the 1870s in order to establish the historical context and background of Qing leaders requesting Grant’s mediation. The chapter begins by outlining the ceremonial, economic, and political significance of the Sino-centric tribute system, followed by a description of Ryukyu’s place in the system. It then moves to a narrative of imperialism in East Asia and its effects on China and Japan. The two countries responded differently, as seen in Japan’s aggressive actions in Ryukyu and the incorporation of Ryukyu into the Japanese nation-state, while China tried to maintain Ryukyu’s status as a dually subordinate tributary to both countries.

## **2.1 Tribute Relations in East Asia**

The exact meaning of “tribute” has long been debated. When U.S. Minister to China Benjamin Avery (1828-1875) wrote U.S. Secretary of State Hamilton Fish (1808-1893) about Ryukyu’s status in 1875, he claimed that “tribute” in the Chinese case did not mean what it implied. As Avery saw it, “tribute” was only a “complimentary gift, a token of intellectual, not political homage. It is the goodwill offering of a small power to

a great one; a manifestation of reverence for the religious hardship of the Emperor of China, such as Catholic states in Europe at one time accorded to the Pope.”<sup>32</sup>

Scholars, too, have sought to clarify the meaning and particulars of the tributary system. John K. Fairbank, editor of the renowned collection of essays, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, stressed the system's ceremonial aspects that allowed non-Chinese rulers to participate in the Sino-centric world order (similar to Avery's description). In exchange for regular tribute visits, offerings of local products, and abiding by certain diplomatic protocols that recognized the suzerainty of the Chinese emperor, tribute states were given imperial gifts from China and granted trade privileges at designated areas near China's borders.<sup>33</sup> Fairbank also pointed out that within the tributary system there was a “graded, concentric hierarchy” of tributaries. At the top of the tributary hierarchy were Korea, Ryukyu, and Vietnam.<sup>34</sup> Further down were Siam, Burma, and the territory presently known as Laos. Even Japan was regarded as a tributary to China, although the last Japanese tribute mission to China was sent during the Ming dynasty.

The economic aspect of tributary relations has also been emphasized by historians such as Tyler Dennett.<sup>35</sup> The Chinese Empire's fame, size, and power naturally attracted smaller surrounding nations who wanted to do business with China. Being a tributary state was one way to “buy” that access. Sending tribute to China, with its vast wealth of resources, in exchange for trade privileges and the lavish gifts usually bestowed upon

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<sup>32</sup> Avery to Fish, April 8, 1875, ADP: SJ-II, 34.

<sup>33</sup> John King Fairbank, “A Preliminary Framework,” in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, ed. John King Fairbank (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 7-10.

<sup>34</sup> The tributary status of all three would be dissolved between 1879-1895. Japan claimed Ryukyu and Korea. France took Vietnam.

<sup>35</sup> Tyler Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia*, Reprint ed. (1922; repr., New York: Octagon Books, 1979), 429.



tributary missions was a good deal for tribute-sending nations, especially smaller ones like Ryukyu.<sup>36</sup>

The political side of being a tributary was significant as well. Although China usually exercised little direct authority in the day-to-day governing of its tributaries,<sup>37</sup> Chinese investiture of rulers in neighboring peoples was a sign of legitimacy and authority. David Kang has stressed the importance of the tribute system (against those who would say it was merely ceremonial) by defining it as “a set of institutional structures that provided an overarching framework for organizing external relations among political actors in early modern East Asia.”<sup>38</sup> This set of rules, with China as the model and hegemon, affected foreign diplomacy, as well as social and economic interactions throughout the region for nearly five centuries during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Even though he admits the Sino-centric tribute system was not uniform in its application to specific situations and states, Kang goes as far as crediting the tribute system with providing a stabilizing social order in the region that led to the relatively peaceful period in East Asia from the beginning of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) to the middle of the 19th century.<sup>39</sup>

With the arrival of the Western powers and the subsequent forced openings of China and Japan in the middle of the 19th century, the tribute system (or just the “Sino-

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<sup>36</sup> In Ryukyu’s case, this point is driven home by the fact that Satsuma Domain in Japan actively encouraged Ryukyu to maintain its tribute status with China from the early 17th century until the Meiji Restoration. Satsuma hoped Ryukyu’s trade privileges with China could also reap economic benefits for the domain.

<sup>37</sup> As Kirk Larsen describes, “Distance and noninterference were the rule” regarding Qing China’s relations with tributaries. See Kirk W. Larsen, “Comforting Fictions: The Tribute System, the Westphalian Order, and Sino-Korean Relations,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 13, no. 2 (May 2013): 237. Thus while China was acknowledged as superior, the Chinese government was usually not involved with the actual governing and administration of the state.

<sup>38</sup> David C. Kang, *East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 81.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-11.

centric system”<sup>40</sup> as some have called it) was in peril. The case of Ryukyu in the 1870s illustrates both the upheaval in the tribute system as well as the different reactions by Japan and China to the changing geopolitical situation of the time. Japan quickly adopted Western views of nation-state sovereignty. China hoped to maintain or only slightly amend the tributary system. As Qing officials learned, however, the possibility of a supposedly sovereign nation state such as Ryukyu being dually subordinate to Japan and China was now untenable.

### **History of Ryukyu: Whose territory?**

In 1372, shortly after the founding of the Ming dynasty, the Chuzan Kingdom (Chinese: *Zhongshan* 中山), the strongest among three kingdoms vying for power in what later became the Ryukyu Kingdom, established tributary relations with China. In 1429, the three kingdoms were united as the Ryukyu Kingdom under the Sho dynasty (Chinese: Shang 尚), the previous rulers of Chuzan.<sup>41</sup> For the next five centuries, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Ryukyu was one of China’s most faithful tributaries. In the early decades of the relationship, Ryukyu was a vital source of horses for the Ming, whose horse trade on the northern border of the empire was disrupted by the presence of the Mongols who had been driven from China in 1368.<sup>42</sup> Ryukyu’s faithful sending of tribute

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<sup>40</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 10. Westad eschews the term “tributary system” and instead describes it as a “Sino-centric system, in which Chinese culture was central to the self-identification of many elite groups in the surrounding Asian countries. China was a constant reference point in their orientation.”

<sup>41</sup> Probably since Chuzan was the most powerful of the three kingdoms (the other two actually sent tribute to Chuzan), most historical works refer to 1372 as the year when tribute relations were established between China and Ryukyu.

<sup>42</sup> Taiwan scholar Cao Yonghe has suggested that in some years more than 900 horses were sent from Ryukyu to China. See Arano Yasunori, “The Kingdom of Ryukyu and the East Asian World Order in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *Ryūkyū in World History*, ed. Josef Kreiner (Bonn: Bier'sche Verlagsanstalt, 2001), 151. Citing Cao Yonghe, “Ming Hongwuchao de Zhongliu guanxi” (Relations

(horses and otherwise) to China resulted in the island kingdom being called the “most devoted vassal state” 其虔事天朝為外藩 最云 of the Ming dynasty in one of Ming’s official histories.<sup>43</sup> In 1554, the Ming Jiajing emperor (r. 1521-1567) conferred upon King Sho Sei 尚清 (1497-1555) a large tablet bearing the inscription “Shouli zhi bang” 守禮之邦, or “Country of Propriety.”<sup>44</sup>

As for Ryukyu’s relationship with Japan, in 1403 a connection between Ryukyu and the Ashikaga shogunate was established. The Japanese later described this connection as a tributary-like relationship, though there was no interference in internal matters in the Ryukyu Kingdom by Japanese officials.<sup>45</sup> The main purpose served by Ryukyu at the time was to be a key trading entrepôt for much of East Asia, including Japan, China, and Southeast Asia. The Onin Wars (1467-1477) in Japan were followed by Japan’s Warring States Period (also known as the *sengoku* period), a century of chaos and civil strife in Japan as individual daimyos vied for power. Coinciding with the Ashikaga shogun’s lack of power came the “golden age” of Ryukyu. Formal relations with Japan during this period were sporadic at best.

With the unification of Japan in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, Ryukyu’s fortunes took a turn for the worse. In 1603, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) established control over a unified Japan, thus initiating the Tokugawa Period (1603-1867) in Japanese history. Satsuma domain’s Shimazu daimyo sought permission to invade

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Between China and Ryukyu in the Hongwu Era of the Ming Dynasty) in *Zhongguo haiyang fazhanshi lunwenyi* (Papers on the Chinese Overseas Expansion), vol. 3, Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan 1988, 283-312.

<sup>43</sup> “Liuqiu” 琉球 (“Ryukyu”) in *Ming shi* 明史 (History of the Ming Dynasty), 323:8370, Scripta Sinica database, <http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/ihpc/hanji?@36^1177639004^802^^5020202400040211@@@1173440211> (accessed February 27, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> Kerr, 133.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 136-137.

Ryukyu and punish the kingdom for its reluctance to send supplies requested by Japan during Japan's two invasions of the Korean Peninsula during the previous decade as well as for refusing to send tribute to Ieyasu in 1603. The expedition proceeded in 1609 and encountered minimal resistance.<sup>46</sup> Ryukyu's King Sho Nei 尚寧 (1554-1620) and his advisors were taken back to Satsuma as hostages. After they swore an oath of allegiance to Satsuma, Sho Nei was allowed to return to Ryukyu in 1611 and continue "ruling" the now quasi-independent kingdom.

Ryukyu's submission to Japan did not mean that its relationship with China ceased. On the contrary, Satsuma actively encouraged Ryukyu to maintain its ties with China while also concealing its recent status change vis-à-vis Japan. Satsuma hoped Ryukyu's relationship with China could reap profits for the domain via trade with China.<sup>47</sup> Thus, from 1609 until the latter half of the 19th century, Ryukyu was a quasi-independent, dually subordinate kingdom that sent tribute to China and Japan.

It is unclear exactly what China knew of Ryukyu's subordination to Japan. It seems unlikely that none of the dozens of Ryukyuan students sent to China after 1609 would have informed the Chinese about Ryukyu's dual status.<sup>48</sup> Probably China did know about the islands' dual subordination – or at least had suspicions – but as long as Ryukyu's tributary relationship with China was maintained, China chose not to

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<sup>46</sup> According to Gregory Smits, an urgent letter was sent from Ryukyu leaders to China via Ryukyuan merchants, but for some reason the letter was destroyed by Ryukyuan in China's Fuzhou Province and never delivered to Chinese officials. It is not certain that the Ming would have intervened anyway. In 1609, the Ming was trying to suppress increasingly pesky forces on the empire's northern border that had begun to make incursions. Among these groups were the Manchus who would conquer the Ming and establish the Qing dynasty. See Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu*, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Robert K. Sakai, "The Ryukyu (Liu-Ch'iu) Islands as Fief of Satsuma," in *The Chinese World Order*, 132-133.

<sup>48</sup> Mitsugu Matsuda writes that there were a total of 97 Ryukyuan students sent to China to study during the period of Ryukyu-China tribute relations. Mitsugu Matsuda, "The Ryukyu Government Scholarship Students to China," *Monumenta Nipponica* 21, no. 3/4 (1966): 274.

intervene.<sup>49</sup> While such an arrangement may seem contradictory (i.e. How could an “independent” foreign country be a tributary of two other separate nations?), such contradictions seemed to have bothered neither China nor Japan, at least not until the 1870s.

It should be remembered that the idea of a dually subordinate state such as Ryukyu was not unprecedented in East Asia. For example, in the 15th century, the kingdom of Malacca paid tribute to both Ming China and Siam. During the Qing dynasty, Siam also received tribute from princes in Cambodia, Burma, and what is now known as Laos at the same time these kingdoms were paying tribute to China.<sup>50</sup> Thus, tribute payments not only governed China-centric relations in East Asia, but also relations among the other countries in the region. As China scholar Ren Xiao has noted, “The real picture [of tribute relations] was not just one big web, as has often been mistakenly described or understood, but rather multiple webs.”<sup>51</sup> China was the regional hegemon, but the tribute system was often flexible, allowed for ambiguity, and was used by each state in whatever ways might be politically expedient at the time.

## **2.2 Imperialism in East Asia and the Ryukyu *shobun***

The Ryukyu Islands controversy, like many other events in East Asia in the 19th century, was strongly influenced by the practice of modern imperialism in the region. The

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<sup>49</sup> Indeed, one Chinese envoy noted the Ryukyuan's strange behavior when Japan was mentioned: “It is said that Liu-ch'iu is not far away from Japan and the two countries always maintain trade relations. However, the Liu-ch'iuans shun this subject very carefully, as if they had no knowledge at all of the existence of that country.” Quoted in Ta-tuan Ch'en, “Investiture of Li-Ch'iu Kings in the Ch'ing Period,” in *The Chinese World Order*, 163. (Citing Wang Ji 王楫, *Shi Liuchiu zalu* 使琉球雜錄 [Accounts of the 1683 Mission] 2:5).

<sup>50</sup> Mark Mancall, “The Ch'ing Tribute System: An Interpretive Essay,” in *The Chinese World Order*, 68.

<sup>51</sup> Ren Xiao, “East Asian Order and China's Role: A Historical Perspective,” in *Japan Association for Asian Studies* [JAAS Aziya Kenkyu] 57, no. 1 (January 2011): 5.

Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856-60) between China, Great Britain and France, and the unequal treaties that resulted greatly impacted the Qing dynasty's response to subsequent diplomatic crises.<sup>52</sup> In addition to revealing China's military weaknesses, the presence of Western imperial powers threatened the "Chinese world order" and redefined the practice of foreign relations in East Asia, especially regarding concepts of national sovereignty and territorial boundaries.

China's experiences with the Western imperial powers and the threat that imperialism posed to China's tributaries help explain why China reacted so strongly to the potential loss of Ryukyu as a tribute-sending state, even as Chinese officials admitted that the amount of tribute was minimal from a financial standpoint.<sup>53</sup> Later, in pitching the case to Grant, Qing officials pointed to the islands' location that could block shipping lanes between the Pacific Ocean and North China, as well as their proximity to Taiwan (thus posing a security risk to China). Qing leaders feared that ceding Ryukyu as a tributary could be the first step in a series of more devastating territorial losses for the Qing government (e.g. Korea and Taiwan).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Scholars such as Kirk Larsen have sought to provide some balance to the "Qing as victim" narrative regarding imperialism in East Asia by noting that China engaged in imperialism as well, in Turkestan (present-day Xinjiang) and Korea in the latter decades of the 19th century. Even so, imperialist actions by the Western powers and Japan did come at the Qing's expense. In sum, Qing China was both imperialist victim and victimizer. See Kirk Larsen, "The Qing Empire (China), Imperialism and the Modern World" in *History Compass* 9, no. 6 (June 2011) 498-508.

<sup>53</sup> Li Hongzhang, "Fu He Zi'e" 覆何子峨 ("Reply to He Zi'e [He Ruzhang]"), May 30, 1878, in *Li Wenzhong gong quanji: Yishu han'gao* 李文忠公全集：譯署函稿 (Complete Works of Li Wenzhong [Li Hongzhang]: Translation Office Letters), vol. 5 (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1962), 8:4, 191. Hereafter Yishu han'gao will be cited YSHG, followed by the location in the specific juan 卷 (scroll) and page number for this particular printing in parentheses. In the example here, it would YSHG 8:4 (191). He Ruzhang's courtesy name was He Zi'e 何子峨.

<sup>54</sup> This point was later made forcefully by Qing official Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837-1909), but other officials, including Li Hongzhang, made similar observations. It should be noted that while Ryukyu and Korea were tribute-sending nations, Taiwan was Chinese territory. Korea was often seen as the most important of China's tributaries (e.g. The Qing dynasty was willing to go to war with Japan over Korea).

## The Rising Threat of Japan and the Ryukyu *shobun*

In July 1853, American Commodore Matthew Perry's "Black Ships" sailed into Edo (later, Tokyo) Harbor and demanded that Japan open its doors to foreign trade with the Western powers. The changes set in motion by Perry's arrival contributed to the Meiji Restoration (1868) that signaled a new era for Japan and its foreign relations. Privy to the effects of foreign imperialism in China, Japanese leaders opted for a different approach in dealing with the Western powers. Japan quickly emulated Western military, technology, and governance. Japan also began to refer to Western models of international law in regards to issues of sovereignty and nation-states. The rapidly reforming country realized the need to clarify its national boundaries in areas such as the Kurile and Sakhalin Islands to the north and the Ryukyu Islands in the south.

In Ryukyu's case, the decade of the 1870s saw the rapid decline of any notion of Ryukyuan independence as Japan officially asserted its sovereignty over the islands.<sup>55</sup> On October 14, 1872, Japanese Foreign Minister Soejima Taneomi (1828-1905) read a short edict to Ryukyuan envoys declaring the creation of Ryukyu *han*, a term signifying the islands' new status as a dependent feudal territory.

Ryukyu, situated to the south, has the same race, habits, and language and has always been loyal to Satsuma. We appreciate this loyalty and here raise you to the peerage and appoint you King of Ryukyu Han. You, Sho Tai, take responsibility in the administration of the *han*, and assist us eternally.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Smits ("The Ryukyu Shobun," 280) argues that this process signaled Japan's first application of Western-style international law in its new foreign policy. UC-Santa Cruz historian Alan Christy claims that the Ryukyu *shobun* could also been seen as post-Meiji Japan's first imperialist projection of power. (Alan S. Christy, "The Making of Imperial Subjects in Okinawa," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 1, no. 3 [Winter 1993])

<sup>56</sup> Kerr 363, citing Dajokwan Nisshi, no. 70 (October 16, 1872).

This move was the first step of Ryukyu's assimilation into Japan in the 1870s, but it still did not fully resolve the islands' status. The previous year, however, an incident occurred that allowed Japan to press the issue of Ryukyu's dual status and start to resolve it definitively. In December 1871, a group of more than 60 Ryukyuan sailors shipwrecked on the coast of Taiwan – Chinese territory – and were captured by members of Taiwan's Paiwan tribe. Fifty-four of the Ryukyu crew were executed by the tribe. As news filtered back to Japan, the Japanese foreign ministry decided the incident provided an opportunity for Japan to intervene on Ryukyu's behalf as a means of securing sovereignty over the kingdom. In March 1874, Japan dispatched an expeditionary force to Taiwan to punish the tribe. Japan's use of force in Chinese territory prompted a diplomatic crisis that was mediated in part by British diplomat Thomas Wade (1818-1895). The negotiations ended in the Peking Agreement of October 1874. The first article of the agreement included wording that came back to haunt China in the later controversy over Ryukyu:

Article I. "The present proceedings, having been undertaken by the government of Japan for the noble purpose of protecting *its citizens*, the government of China will therefore not hold Japan to blame." (emphasis added) 日本國此次所辦原為保民義舉起見中國不指以為不是。<sup>57</sup>

By allowing the Ryukyuans to be referred to as Japanese subjects, China had tacitly acknowledged Japanese suzerainty over the islands, or so Japan later claimed. In

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<sup>57</sup> "Agreement Between the High Commissioner Plenipotentiary of Japans and the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs," October 31, 1874 in *Treaties, Conventions, etc. Between China and Foreign States*, vol. 2, Second ed. (Shanghai: Department of the Inspector General of Customs, 1917), 585. The crucial term in the wording of the treaty is *min* 民, which could be translated as "citizens," or, more ambiguously, "people." The Japanese used the term to mean "citizens" (i.e. Japanese citizens). French legal adviser to Japan Gustave Boissonade (1825-1910) told the Japanese that the wording of the treaty could help prove Japan's legal authority over Ryukyu. Chinese leaders did not view the wording of the treaty in the same way, thus highlighting the role that different interpretations and perspectives of diplomatic language can have in such disputes. The scholarship reviewed in this thesis all take the Japanese understanding of the term as definitive.



addition, the treaty forced China to pay an indemnity to the families of the slain Ryukyu sailors. Since China claimed authority over both territories in question (Ryukyu and Taiwan) at the time, submitting to Japanese demands to pay the Ryukyuans further compromised China's claims on the islands in the future dispute.

From this point onward, the assimilation of Ryukyu into Japan accelerated. In late 1874, Ryukyu officials were summoned to Tokyo and given tours to show off Japanese factories, schools, military training facilities, and other examples of Japan's modernization. Early the next year, Japanese official Matsuda Michikyuki informed Ryukyu officials that since the islands were susceptible to foreign imperial powers, Japanese troops would soon be stationed there. In addition, Ryukyu was to start using the Meiji Japan reign dates in all of its communications (not just with Japan).<sup>58</sup>

On May 29, 1875, Japan officially ordered Ryukyu to stop sending tribute to China.<sup>59</sup> There would be no more dual subordination, but some Ryukyu officials were not ready to relinquish their previous status. Between 1875 and 1878, Ryukyu officials sent 14 petitions to the Japanese government requesting that the island kingdom be allowed to revert to the arrangement of dual subordination to both China and Japan. All of the claims were rejected.<sup>60</sup> In addition to these pleas with Japan, Ryukyu King Sho Tai 尚泰 (1843-

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<sup>58</sup> Smits, "Ryukyu Shobun," 286.

<sup>59</sup> This official prohibition came on the heels of an awkward situation in March 1875, when the Japanese *charge d'affaires* in Beijing, Tei Einei, discovered that a group of Ryukyuans was also in the city, having brought tribute to China once again. Shortly after Tei was denied the opportunity to meet with the Ryukyuans by Qing officials, Japan enacted the May 1875 prohibition. In an ironic twist, Chinese official Prince Gong was the one who suggested Japan's actions, as a way of resolving the dual subordination issue. In an argument with Tei Einei, who had claimed that Ryukyu was a Japanese tributary, Gong said, "Oh, Lew Chew (Ryukyu) is tributary to Japan, is it? Well, you send to Lew Chew and prevent people of those islands from sending tribute-bearing deputations to China, and then we will believe that they are tributary to Japan. They haven't said they were subject to your government." (Tei Einei to Benjamin Avery, memorandum, 31 March 1875, in ADP: Sino-Japanese II, 32-33.)

<sup>60</sup> He Ruzhang to John Bingham, memorandum, July 24, 1878 in ADP: SJ-II, 41.

1901) also sent a secret message to Chinese officials in Fuzhou Province informing them of the sudden change and asking for China's help.<sup>61</sup>

## 2.3 The Chinese Reaction

News of Japan's assertiveness in Ryukyu proved worrisome to Chinese officials, including the eminent Li Hongzhang. Li, who was both governor-general of Zhili Province and de facto leader of the Qing dynasty's foreign affairs, had taken pride in the Sino-Japanese Friendship and Trade Treaty he had brokered in 1871. Unlike Chinese treaties with the Western powers, the Japan treaty did not include a clause about most-favored nation treatment. Li had even contemplated the possibility of a Sino-Japanese alliance against the Western powers.<sup>62</sup> Now, after Japan's actions toward Ryukyu, such hopes seemed foolish. A December 1874 memorial from Li reflected his anxieties about the rising threat of Japan:

(Japan's) power is daily expanding, and her ambition is not small. Therefore she dares to rule the East, despises China, and takes action by invading Taiwan. Although the Western powers are strong, they are still seventy thousand *li* away from us, whereas Japan is at our door, and is prying into our emptiness or solitude (i.e. weaknesses of our defense measures). (Japan) is truly becoming become China's permanent and great anxiety." 其勢日張其志不小故敢稱雄東土藐視中國有窺犯臺灣之舉泰西雖尚在七萬里以外日本則近在戶闥伺我虛竇誠為中國永遠大患。<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> He Jing 何璟 and Ding Ruchang 丁日昌, "Minzhe zongdu He Jing deng zou juqing chenzou Liuqiu zhigong Riben gengzuzhe 閩浙總督何璟等奏據情陳奏琉球職貢日本梗阻摺 (He Jing, Governor-General of Fujian and Zhejiang, memorial about Japan's seizing Ryukyu and blocking tribute missions), June 24, 1877, in *Qing Guangxuchao ZhongRi jiaoshe shiliao xuanji* 清光緒朝中日交涉史料選輯 (Selections of historical material related to Sino-Japanese relations during the reign of the Qing dynasty's Guangxu emperor) (Taipei: Taiwan yinhang, 1984), 1:5. (hereafter ZRXJ-GX).

<sup>62</sup> Leung, "Li Hung-chang, 1871-1881," 162.

<sup>63</sup> Li Hongzhang, "Chouban tiejia jianqing qianshi pian" 籌辦鐵甲兼請遣使片 (Prepare for war while also dispatching an envoy), December 10, 1874, in *Li Wenzhong gong quanji: Quanshu zougao* 李文忠公全集: 全書奏稿 (Complete Works of Li Wenzhong: Complete Letters and Memorials). Vol. 19. China: Jinling Fuzou, 1908; Quoted in John K. Fairbank and Ssu-Yu Teng, *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey 1839-1923* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 118. (hereafter, cited as CRW)

In a May 1878 letter, He Ruzhang (1838-1891), Qing China's recently appointed Minister to Japan, outlined three possible options for the Chinese response to the Ryukyu situation: (1) Send a military force against the Japanese military stationed in Ryukyu and force Ryukyu to resume the sending of tribute; (2) Ask Ryukyu, with China's backing, to declare war on Japan; (3) Find a diplomatic solution.<sup>64</sup> He personally favored military intervention, but Li disagreed. "The tribute that China receives from Ryukyu is not of great benefit 中國受琉球朝貢本無大力," Li wrote in reply. To him, Ryukyu was not worth an armed conflict.<sup>65</sup>

Instead, Li instructed He to pursue a diplomatic solution. He got off to a rocky start. In October 1878, He sent a scathing letter to Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Terashima Munenori (1832-1893). He accused Japan of oppressing Ryukyu and warned that Japan should prepare for backlash from the international community: "Now, if you should treat Ryukyu with insult and oppression and arbitrarily presume to change old established regulations, how could you face my country and how could you face the countries that have treaty relations with Ryukyu?"<sup>66</sup> The "violent language," as Terashima described it, resulted in Japan stonewalling Chinese attempts to negotiate in the following months. Had a third party, in the person of former U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant, not been introduced into the situation, it is doubtful that Japan would have ever agreed to discussing the issue again.

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<sup>64</sup> He Ruzhang, "He Zi'e lai han" 何子峨來函 (He Zi'e's Letter), May 28, 1878, YSHG 8:2-4 (189-190).

<sup>65</sup> Li Hongzhang, "Fu He Zi'e" 覆何子峨 ("Reply to He Zi'e"), May 30, 1878, YSHG 8:4 (191).

<sup>66</sup> "From the Chinese Envoys Ho and Chang to Mr. Terashima, Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs," October 7, 1878, English translation in Eitetsu Yamaguchi and Yūkō Arakawa, eds., *The Demise of the Ryukyu Kingdom: Western Accounts and Controversy* (Ginowan-City, Okinawa, Japan: Yojushorin, 2002), 240. The United States was among the foreign countries that had signed a treaty with Ryukyu.

## **2.4 Summary**

Until the latter half of the 19th century, the Sino-centric tributary system shaped foreign relations in East Asia. As part of that system, the Ryukyu Kingdom was dually subordinate to both China and Japan (via Satsuma domain). Japan not only knew of Ryukyu's relationship with China, but actively encouraged it. With the arrival of the Western powers and subsequent unequal treaties forced on China and Japan, foreign relations in East Asian went through a drastic change. Japan responded by claiming sole ownership of Ryukyu. Chinese official Li Hongzhang hoped to resolve the issue through diplomacy, but He Ruzhang's caustic letter to Japanese officials in 1878 shut down any potential negotiations until the arrival of former U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant in 1879.

### Chapter 3

#### **“Best of a Bad Lot:” China Looks to the United States and U.S. Grant**

China had few allies to which it could turn in the Ryukyu crisis. Many historians have noted that the Qing dynasty often used the diplomatic ploy of “using barbarians to control barbarians” (*yi yi zhi yi* 以夷制夷). According to John Russell Young (1840-1899), Qing leader Li Hongzhang was no stranger to the idea: “He knew how to play one against the other, when to give a significant smile to the ambassador of one power, or a no less significant shrug to the envoy of another power.”<sup>67</sup> But while Li Hongzhang’s turning to the United States and Ulysses S. Grant in the Ryukyu controversy displays shades of this practice, it also seems to represent a new phase of Qing foreign policy, both in tactics and potential allies. China needed someone to help get Japan to the negotiating table and Grant, as the former president of the least threatening of the major Western powers, was an appealing option.

This chapter recounts China’s efforts to salvage the tributary relationship with Ryukyu. Li Hongzhang and Prince Gong are shown to have employed several strategies to resolve the dispute, including trying to apply international law and rally global public opinion against Japan to resolve the Ryukyu crisis. The chapter then recounts the history of Sino-U.S. relations up to the time of Grant’s visit to China to show that the United States, though sharing in the gains acquired by more aggressive powers such as Great Britain and France, was still perceived in a more positive light by Chinese officials. Part

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<sup>67</sup> John Russell Young and May Dow Russell Young, *Men and Memories: Personal Reminiscences*, vol. 2 (New York: F.T. Neely, 1901), 307-8.

of this image was abetted by the presence of certain Americans – including Anson Burlingame and William Pethick – who had close relations to Qing officials and seemed sympathetic to China’s position in the international arena. Their assistance in Qing foreign relations paved the way for requesting the help of Grant, a former U.S. President who also had a good reputation among Chinese due to his foreign policy, in dealing with Japan.

### **3.1 Li Hongzhang and New Approaches in Qing Diplomacy**

It is helpful at this point to trace the history of Li Hongzhang’s experiences with foreign assistance during the latter decades of the Qing dynasty. This process eventually led to requesting Grant’s mediation in the Ryukyu controversy in 1879. Confronted with increasingly complicated issues on China’s frontiers, Li’s foreign policy began to include more innovative ideas that incorporated the use of Western advisers and appealed to Western international law and international public opinion.

Li Hongzhang was born in Anhui Province in 1823. His father, Li Wen’an 李文安 (1801-1855), was a government official and classmate of Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811-1872), a connection that later played out in Zeng’s mentorship of the younger Li. Li Hongzhang earned the prestigious *jinshi* 進士 degree at the early age of 24, but soon after joined Zeng in putting down the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864).

Li’s first extensive encounters with foreigners came during the war with the Taiping forces, when Li’s Huai Army fought alongside the foreigner-organized “Ever Victorious Army” (*changsheng jun* 常勝軍) in the Yangzi River Delta. By the summer of 1862, the leader of the foreign army, an American adventurer named Frederick Townsend

Ward (1831-1862), reported to Li on an almost daily basis. In February 1863, Li wrote to his mentor Zeng Guofan about his interactions with the foreigners. Though Li was “really embittered by the trouble they cause” 實苦煩擾, he was also impressed with foreign military technology and hoped China might succeed in emulating it one day:

I feel deeply ashamed that the Chinese weapons are far inferior to those of foreign countries. Every day I warn and instruct my officers to be humble-minded, to bear the humiliation, and to learn one or two secret methods from the Westerners in the hope that we may increase our knowledge. 我惟深以中國軍器遠遜外洋為恥日戒諭將士虛心忍辱學得西人一二密法期有增益而能戰之程學啓。<sup>68</sup>

Li's attitude reflected that of other Chinese leaders involved in what came to be known as China's Self-Strengthening Movement (*zhiqiang yundong* 自強運動),<sup>69</sup> which advocated the incorporation of Western technology and methods to help China develop and strengthen itself against the encroachments of foreign powers. Over the next two decades, the Self-Strengthening Movement produced several new projects and initiatives. In 1865, the Jiangnan Arsenal was built near Shanghai to manufacture Western-style weapons.<sup>70</sup> The China Merchants' Steam Navigation Company was founded by Li in 1872 and the Kaiping coal mines were opened near Tianjin in 1878 (also with Li's input).

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<sup>68</sup> Li Hongzhang, “Shang Zeng Xiang” 上曾相 (To Zeng Xiang), February 2, 1863, in *Li Wenzhong gong quanji: Pengliao han'gao* 李文忠公全集: 朋僚函稿 (Complete Works of Li Wenzhong [Li Hongzhang]: Correspondence with friends), vol. 4 (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1962), 2:46, 59-60. Hereafter, PLHG, followed by the location in the specific juan 卷 (scroll) and page number for this particular printing in parentheses. In the example here, it would PLHG 2:46 (59-60). Modified translation from CRW, Doc. 15, “Li's Letter to Tseng Kuo-fan on the Ever-Victorious Army,” 69.

<sup>69</sup> This movement has also been referred to in Chinese as *yangwu yundong* 洋務運動, or “Westernization Movement.”

<sup>70</sup> One of the arsenal's first tasks was to supply small arms and ammunition for Li's Huai army in his successful campaign against the Nien rebels (J. A. G. Roberts, *A History of China*, Second ed. [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006], 184.)

Li's involvement in these undertakings was facilitated by his continued rise through the ranks of political power in China.<sup>71</sup> In 1870, he was given the prestigious position of governor-general of Zhili Province. Two years later, he was named Grand Secretary. Li's government posts, his involvement with the modernizing self-strengthening projects, and his location in Tianjin, the nearest coastal city to Beijing, gave him an influential role in China's foreign affairs. According to John Russell Young, the U.S. Minister to China from 1882 to 1885 and a key intermediary in the Ryukyu crisis of 1879, "Nothing was done without his [Li's] consent, and when a question became critical, a journey to Tientsin by the foreign minister was the only way of drawing it to a head."<sup>72</sup>

Another result of Qing attempts to adapt to the rapidly changing international environment was the creation of a new government department, the Zongli Yamen 總理衙門, in March 1861 to handle issues specifically related to *yangwu* 洋務, or "foreign matters." According to Jonathan Spence, the creation of the Yamen, a special board serving under the Grand Council, was the first significant innovation in the Qing central bureaucracy since the Yongzheng Emperor created the nucleus of the Grand Council in 1729.<sup>73</sup> As will be seen in the conclusion of the Ryukyu crisis, the degree of true power exercised by the Yamen may be questioned, but as part of the Self-Strengthening Movement, it was a step in a new direction for the Qing.

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<sup>71</sup> Indeed, Li parlayed many self-strengthening initiatives into a personal fortune. Frederic Wakeman quotes a common saying of the time as, "Every dog that barks for Li is fat." (Frederic E. Wakeman, *The Fall of Imperial China* [New York: Free Press, 1975], 193.)

<sup>72</sup> Young, *Men and Memories* 312.

<sup>73</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 197.



From 1861 to 1884, the Zongli Yamen was led by Prince Gong (also known as Yixin 奕訢).<sup>74</sup> Among the reforms instituted by Gong and the Yamen was the establishment of a foreign language school – the Tongwenguan 同文館, which also taught Western concepts of mathematics, law, natural science, astronomy, and chemistry. The school's head instructor was an Indiana Presbyterian missionary named W.A.P. Martin (1827-1916), who translated Henry Wheaton's 1836 treatise *Elements of International Law* into Chinese in 1864.<sup>75</sup>

### Appeals to International Law

Li and Gong both seemed to recognize the need for the Qing government to become more familiar with international law as defined by the Western powers.<sup>76</sup> Multiple times when discussing the Ryukyu situation, Li based part of his appeals on international law. He felt that the 1871 treaty between China and Japan, which included a clause about respecting one another's "territorial possessions" 兩國所屬邦土...不可稍有侵越,<sup>77</sup> legally forbade Japan's aggressive action in Ryukyu.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Gong's nickname was Devil Number Six *guizi liu* 鬼子六 due to his frequent dealings with Westerners. See James Z. Gao, *Historical Dictionary of Modern China (1800-1949)*, (Scarecrow Press: Lanham, Md. 2009), 283.

<sup>75</sup> Westad 80. Previously, in the 1840s, parts of Emerich Vattel's 1758 *Law of Nations* had also been translated into Chinese. These actions somewhat reflected the advice of Wei Yuan, who wrote in 1842 that, "he who wishes to control the outer barbarians must begin by understanding their circumstances, and he who wishes to understand their circumstances must begin by establishing a bureau for the translation of barbarian books." 然則欲制外夷者必先悉夷情始欲悉夷情者必先立譯館 (Wei Yuan, *Haiguo tuzhi* 海國圖志 [Maritime Policy] 110-111; Modified translation of CRW, "Wei Yuan's Statement of a Policy for Maritime Defense, 1842," 34.)

<sup>76</sup> As one example, Li sent Ma Jianzhong 馬建忠 (1844-1900) to France in 1876 to study international law. Upon his return to China, he became a key legal adviser to Li and the Qing. Kenneth E. Folsom, *Friends, Guests, and Colleagues: The Mu-fu System in the Late Ch'ing Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 139.

<sup>77</sup> "ZhongRi xiu hao tiaogui" 中日修好條規 (Sino-Japanese Friendship Regulations) in Wang Xi 王璽, *Li Hongzhang yu ZhongRi dingyue* 李鴻章與中日訂約 (1871) (Li Hongzhang and the Sino-Japanese Treaty of 1871). (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 1981), 197.

But the allusion to the treaty exposed an apparent contradiction – at least in Japanese minds – in the Qing government’s position, for China also frequently referred to Ryukyu as an independent country. The quandary was reflected in an exchange of letters between Terashima Munenori and the Zongli Yamen in 1879. The Japanese Foreign Minister pointed out how it was “a great puzzle” that China, in justifying its protests over Japan’s annexation of Ryukyu, would claim that Ryukyu was an independent state (i.e. not part of China) and yet also quote the first article in the 1871 treaty referring to respect for each other’s territorial possessions.<sup>79</sup> The Zongli Yamen’s response reveals the incompatibility of the two countries’ stances on the issue:

We reply that if the king on his accession to the throne is invested with the regal rank by Commissioners sent from another country (i.e. China) for that purpose, and pays tribute to her, this is dependence; but if the orders and commands of a government are not controlled or directed by another, this is national sovereignty. These two things are not impossible.<sup>80</sup>

Both countries tried to employ elements of Western legalism to the situation. Whereas Japan had moved toward clarifying borders, Qing China hoped to maintain at least a semblance of the more ambiguous tribute system by leaning on the 1871 treaty. Unfortunately for Li and China, they learned through the Ryukyu crisis another harsh reality related to international law, as stated by Japanese intellectual Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) in 1878: “A handful of Treaties of Friendship are not worth a basket of

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<sup>78</sup> Li Hongzhang, “Miyi Riben zheng Liuqiu shi” 密議日本爭琉球事 (Secret discussion of Japan vying for Ryukyu), June 9, 1878, YSHG 8:1 (189).

<sup>79</sup> “Reply of the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs,” December 15, 1879. Translation in Enclosure 1 of Dispatch 533, ADP: SJ-II, 125.

<sup>80</sup> “The Ministers of the Tsungli-yamen to the Japanese Minister resident in Peking,” December 15, 1879. Translation in Doc. 123, Enclosure 1 of Dispatch 533, ADP: SJ-II, 155-156.

ammunition.”<sup>81</sup> Treaties and law were only effective to the degree that they could be backed by military power.

### Global Public Opinion

Appeals to treaties and international law were not the only strategies employed by Li in dealing with Japan. Li, along with other Chinese officials involved with foreign diplomacy, also sought to rally international public opinion against Japan. It was a particular savvy strategy in the Ryukyu crisis, for the Japanese government, in its effort to impress the Western powers, was perhaps acutely sensitive to its global public image at the time.<sup>82</sup>

If Li could convince other countries (especially those with whom Japan hoped to curry favor) that Japan was overstepping its bounds and violating international law in regards to the sovereignty of Ryukyu, perhaps he could temper Japan’s ambitions in the islands. The potential power of such appeals to the Western powers was recognized by Li’s adviser Feng Guifen 馮桂芬 (1809-1874) in 1861.

The various barbarians, though ignorant of our ‘three bonds’ [the relationship between prince and minister, father and son, husband and wife] still know one thing, namely, good faith. It’s not because they are truly trustworthy, but because, if one nation breaks faith, then a hundred nations will rise in a group to attack and oppress her so that she is obliged to keep faith. 諸夷不知三綱而尚知一信非真能信也一不信而百國群起而攻之箝制之使不得不信也。<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Marius B. Jansen, *Japan and Its World: Two Centuries of Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 60. Original source not cited.

<sup>82</sup> Kerr 377. For example, a statement by the Meiji government warned Japanese that, “the ignorant opinion that foreigners are wild barbarians, dogs and sheep” was to be abandoned. “We must set up new procedures to show that they are to be considered on the same level as Chinese.” Quoted in Marius B. Jansen, “Japanese Views of China During the Meiji Period,” in *Approaches to Modern Chinese History*, eds. Albert Feuerwerker, Rhoads Murphey, and Mary C. Wright (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 164.

<sup>83</sup> Feng Guifen, “Shanyu yiyi” 善馭夷議 (On the Better Control of the Barbarians) in Feng Guifen, *Jiaobinlu Kangyi* 校邠廬抗議 (Personal Protests from the Study of Jiaobin) (Taipei: Xuehai

Chinese officials on several occasions tried to leverage the potential harm to Japan's good name that the annexation of Ryukyu might bring. In an 1879 letter, China wrote that, "This will not be good for the fame of Japan, and will be condemned by the public opinion of all foreign powers."<sup>84</sup> Even in He Ruzhang's inflammatory letter from October 1878, he attempted to shame Japan by referencing how the Ryukyu case might look in light of international law and public opinion by telling Japanese leaders that, "to set at naught treaty obligations for no good reason, and to crush a small country, is a course of procedure which, if looked upon in the light of men's feelings or of international law, will undoubtedly meet the disapprobation of all countries which hear of it."<sup>85</sup> He's letter, of course, was not well received by Japanese officials and only served to exacerbate tensions between the two countries. Japan had little respect for China or the power it could bring to bear, whether in the military or diplomatic realm. If China could garner the support of an influential Western power that Japan respected, however, the situation might change.

Thus, in addition to being a creative strategy in light of the changed international situation faced by the Qing, the appeal to global opinion was also one of the *only* remaining options for Li and the Qing to use in hopes of salvaging its relationship with Ryukyu in the late 1870s. As repeated attempts to broach the issue with Japan were ignored by Japanese officials, internationalizing the issue was perhaps the Qing's last feasible (non-military) option to resolve the issue.

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chubanshe, 1967), 163-164. Modified translation of CRW, "On the Better Control of the Barbarians," 55.

<sup>84</sup> "The Ministers of the Tsungli Yamen to the Japanese Minister resident in Peking," December 15, 1879, translation in Doc. 120, Enclosure 1 of Dispatch 533, ADP: SJ-II, 112.

<sup>85</sup> "Ho and Chang to Terashima," *The Demise of the Ryukyu Kingdom*, 240.

### 3.2 Sino-U.S. Relations to 1879

In implementing the strategies described above, China needed the mediation of another country that would demand more respect from Japan. Great Britain, the most influential of the Western powers, might have been one option, but the mediation of British official Thomas Wade in the 1874 Formosa Incident had not ended well for China. Also, the British recently had pushed for more concessions as a result of the Margary Affair in 1876. Sino-French relations had also turned sour in the 1870s, following the Tianjin Massacre in 1871 and French forays into Annam (Vietnam), another Chinese tributary.<sup>86</sup> China and Russia were involved in a territorial dispute in the Ili Valley at the same time as the Ryukyu crisis. Thus, with limited options, China's best strategy was to look to a country that was staunchly anti-imperialist in its rhetoric, had interests in East Asia, and with whom the Qing had had relatively few altercations.

That country was the United States, whose former president, Ulysses S. Grant, happened to be coming to East Asia in the near future. Grant's role as a prominent American is important because the United States government, strictly speaking, adopted a policy of neutrality and non-interference in disputes between other countries. Grant, however, was traveling in East Asia as a private citizen, possibly allowing China to use his prestige as the former highest official in America in a mediating capacity in the Ryukyu dispute.

In the early decades of American contact with the Qing dynasty, Chinese officials made little distinction between Americans and other Westerners in China. In time, however, distinctions began to be made, especially with the advent of the First Opium

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<sup>86</sup> Eventually resulting in the Sino-French War of 1884-1885.

War (1839-1842). For example, one Chinese official proposed granting the United States, which officially took a stance of neutrality in the war, special trading privileges as a means of obtaining American assistance against the British.<sup>87</sup>

The lack of aggressive American action against China on the frontlines of the Opium Wars stemmed in part from a longstanding foreign policy of neutrality and non-interference – at least in public rhetoric. Starting with George Washington, who encouraged an official posture of American neutrality in foreign policy during his farewell address, and Thomas Jefferson, whose famous advice that the United States have “entangling alliances with none” has been a fixture in scholarly works on early American diplomacy, American officials often seemed to revere their government’s tradition of neutrality as holy writ.<sup>88</sup> In the case of China, the neutral stance sometimes came in handy, allowing the United States to claim the moral high ground and present itself against the other, more overtly aggressive Western powers. For example, on March 16, 1840, in the midst of the First Opium War between Britain and China, U.S. Congressman Caleb Cushing asserted that the Americans in China (at Canton) “have manifested a proper respect for the laws and public rights of the Chinese empire, in honorable contrast with the outrageous misconduct of the English.”<sup>89</sup>

### **Jackal imperialists?**

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<sup>87</sup> For example, see Yilubu 伊里布, “Proposal to Use the Americans against the British,” memorial, February 6, 1841, trans. Earl Swisher, in *China’s Management of the American Barbarians: A Study of Sino-American Relations, 1841-1861, with Documents*, by Earl Swisher (New Haven, CT: Far Eastern Publications, 1953), 57.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “First Inaugural Address,” *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* vol. 33, 2006, <http://jeffersonpapers.princeton.edu/selected-documents/first-inaugural-address-0>.

<sup>89</sup> House, *Congressional Globe*, 26th Cong., 1st sess., H. Rept., 18th ed., vol. 8 (1840), 275, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llcg&fileName=007/llcg007.db&recNum=294>.

In subsequent years, Cushing's interest in China would go far beyond the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives. In 1843, after the conclusion of the First Opium War, Secretary of State Daniel Webster (1782-1852) sent Cushing to China to conclude a treaty similar to the one Great Britain had negotiated the year before. While U.S. officials may have publicly lambasted British actions in propagating the war, the British victory meant that other Western nations could share in the spoils, including greater access for ships, merchants, and missionaries.<sup>90</sup>

Historians have labeled the United States' no-cost, "share in the spoils" strategy in China by a number of unflattering names, such as "jackal diplomacy" and "hitchhiking diplomacy."<sup>91</sup> There is some debate over whether it was competition or cooperation (or some combination of the two) with the British that motivated U.S. actions in securing the imperialism-bought treaties with China. In the end, the result was the same: the aggressive actions of British forces cleared the way for the United States to secure its own advantages in China. Even Cushing, who one scholar has described as an "ardent Anglophobe,"<sup>92</sup> admitted such: "I recognize the debt of gratitude which the United States and all other nations owe to England, for what she has accomplished in China. From all this much benefit has accrued to the United States."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Securing privileges equal to those of Great Britain was emphasized in U.S. Secretary of State Daniel Webster's instructions to Cushing in 1843. Webster told Cushing, "It is hoped and trusted that you will succeed in making a treaty such as has been concluded between England and China." (Webster to Cushing, May 8, 1843, in Jules Davids, ed., *American Diplomatic and Public Papers: The United States and China, Series I, the Treaty system and the Taiping rebellion, 1842-1860*, vol. 1 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1973) [Hereafter, ADP: USC-I] 154.)

<sup>91</sup> Anderson 95; Hendrickson 282.

<sup>92</sup> Macabe Keliher, "Anglo-American Rivalry and the Origins of U.S. China Policy," *Diplomatic History* 31, no. 2 (April 2007): 249.

<sup>93</sup> Senate, *Presidential Message Transmitting Treaty with Ta Tsing Empire*, 28th Cong., 2d sess., S. Doc. 67 (January 28, 1845), 80, [http://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t47.d48.450\\_s.doc.67?accountid=9783](http://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t47.d48.450_s.doc.67?accountid=9783).

Chinese officials also recognized America's willing reliance on other countries' military action. Writing during the Second Opium War (1856-1860), Chinese intellectual Wang Tao (1828-1897), while acknowledging the United States as the "the most docile Western country," also noted that the U.S. "still takes the victory or failure of England as its own glory or disgrace...(America) has shared all the benefits gained by England and France." 泰西中其最馴者莫如米利堅然亦以英之勝負為榮辱...與英法二國有益同沾.<sup>94</sup>

Wang's statement illustrates the enigma of Sino-U.S. diplomacy in the 19th century. The United States was a Western power that shared in the spoils of imperialism and unequal treaties signed with China. And yet, because the U.S. did not actively initiate aggression against China, the Qing government generally viewed the United States in a more positive light ("most docile") than other Western countries. Despite the "jackal" imperialism, eminent Chinese officials such as Chinese general Zeng Guofan – Li Hongzhang's mentor – still described Americans as "pure and honest" in nature. By not joining the British and French invasion of Canton in 1858, Zeng deduced that, "the Americans are sincere and obedient in their dealings with China and aren't part of some unbreakable clique with the British and French."<sup>95</sup>

According to John Russell Young, Li Hongzhang viewed the United States from a similar perspective, at least in terms of American intentions in China:

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<sup>94</sup> Wang Tao, "Shang Xu Junqing zhongzheng diershu" 上徐君青中丞第二書 (The second letter to Xu Junqing of Zheng) in *Taoyuan chidu* 弢園尺牘 (Correspondence from the Tao Garden), 40. Modified translation of CRW, Doc. 39, "A Refutation of the Idea of Using Barbarians Against Barbarians," 137.

<sup>95</sup> Stephen R. Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 177. Quoting from *Zeng Guofan quanji* 曾國藩全集 (The complete works of Zeng Guofan) 3:879-882 (Beijing: Zhongguo zhigong chubanshe, 2001), Dec. 19, 1860.



The policy of [Li] toward the United States was amity. He believed, as he would say in his cynical way, that the United States was the one power which had nothing to gain by assailing China, that it was our selfish interest to be friendly, and therefore he could have no anxiety.<sup>96</sup>

While perhaps a backhanded compliment, Li's assessment did demonstrate a possible preference – however slight or shallow – for American diplomacy over that practiced by the European powers. In the Ryukyu crisis, Li's inclination spurred a direct request for American assistance in dealing with Japan.

### **American Friends in China**

Part of Chinese leaders' more favorable impression of the United States stemmed from Li and the Qing government's experiences in dealing with certain American diplomats at the time.<sup>97</sup> Foremost among these was Anson Burlingame (1820-1870), the U.S. Minister to China from 1861 to 1867 and thereafter the Qing-appointed leader of what is known as the Burlingame Mission (1867-1870), China's first diplomatic mission to Europe and the United States. While serving in China, Burlingame had spearheaded the short-lived "cooperative policy" among the United States, Great Britain, France, and Russia. According to Burlingame, the powers had agreed to, "not ask for, nor take concessions of, territory in the treaty ports, or in any way interfere with the jurisdiction of

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<sup>96</sup> Young, *Men and Memories*, 311.

<sup>97</sup> Certainly the United States was not the only Western nation to have trusted foreigners working with the Qing government. Indeed, perhaps the most powerful foreigner holding office in China was Great Britain's Robert Hart (1835-1911), inspector-general of China's Imperial Maritime Customs Service. The point is, however, that some individual Americans had a positive influence on the Qing's image of the United States in the 19th century.

the Chinese government over its own people, nor even menace the territorial integrity of the Chinese empire.”<sup>98</sup>

Such actions esteemed him and, by association, the United States to some degree, in the eyes of the Qing government. It is not surprising, then, that when Prince Gong decided to send a Chinese delegation abroad in 1867, he looked to the soon-to-be retiring Burlingame for assistance. Burlingame readily accepted the offer. He soon thereafter wrote U.S. Secretary of State William Seward (1801-1872), explaining that, “when the oldest nation in the world, containing one-third of the human race, seeks, for the first time, to come into relations with the West, and requests the youngest nation, through its representation, to act as the medium of such change, the mission is one not to be solicited or rejected.”<sup>99</sup>

The Burlingame Mission arrived in the United States in March 1868. During their stop in Washington D.C., Burlingame and the other members of the mission concluded the Burlingame-Seward Treaty of 1868, an addendum to the Treaty of Tianjin of 1858 between China and the United States.<sup>100</sup> The treaty recognized the territorial boundaries of China, guaranteed religious toleration, established consular jurisdiction, gave China most-favored nation status in the United States, and allowed for free migration of each country’s citizens (a key provision that later impacted Grant’s mediation in the Ryukyu dispute).<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Burlingame to Seward, June 20, 1863, in Jules Davids, ed., *American Diplomatic and Public Papers: The United States and China, 1861-1893, Series II American Relations with China*, vol. 1 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1979) [Hereafter, ADP: ARC-I], 28-29.

<sup>99</sup> Burlingame to Seward, December 14, 1867 in ADP: ARC-I, 43.

<sup>100</sup> During the mission’s time in Washington, members of the delegation also visited with Republican Presidential candidate Ulysses S. Grant and his wife Julia Dent Grant. (“The Chinese Embassy on a Round of Visits,” *New York Herald*, June 7, 1868.)

<sup>101</sup> Article 5 of the treaty stated that, “The United States of America and the Emperor of China cordially recognize the inherent and inalienable right of man to change his home and allegiance, and also the mutual

Burlingame also used the mission to exhort his fellow Americans to take a more conciliatory approach to China. Criticizing the effects of Western imperialism on the Qing dynasty, Burlingame implored a crowd in New York to look at China in a new light.

Forget your ancient prejudices...abandon your assumptions of superiority, and submit your questions with her, as she proposes to submit her questions with you – to the arbitration of reason. She wishes no war; she asks of you not to interfere in her internal affairs...because the Western nations have reversed their old doctrine of force, she responds, and, in proportion as you have expressed your goodwill, she has come forth to meet you.<sup>102</sup>

Burlingame also fed into the perpetual hopes of Americans who saw China's vast populace as a ripe market for business or missionary activity. According to the optimistic Burlingame, the wheels of progress were turning quickly in China. The good news for Americans was that China was "willing to trade with you, to buy of you, to sell to you, to help you strike off the shackles from trade. She invites your merchants, she invites your missionaries."<sup>103</sup>

Several Western observers, including Burlingame's successor in China, U.S. Minister J. Ross Browne, chafed at Burlingame's rosy assessment. Browne stated that pronouncements of "peculiarly friendly" relations between China and America and "great advantages to our commerce" were unfounded. In Browne's view, the Qing government did not have any favorites among the foreign powers, but instead felt "antipathy and distrust towards all who have come in to disturb the administration of its domestic affairs."<sup>104</sup> Despite Browne's dissenting view, however, the idea that the United States and China had – or could have – a "special relationship" was further ingrained in the

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advantage of the free migration and emigration of their citizens and subjects respectively from one country to the other for purposes of curiosity, of trade, or as permanent residents." ("Treaty of Trade, Consuls, and Emigration," July 28, 1868, in ADP: ARC-I, 49.)

<sup>102</sup> *Banquet to His Excellency Anson Burlingame and His Associates of the Chinese Embassy by the Citizens of New York, on Tuesday, June 23, 1868* (New York: Sun Book and Job Print House, 1868), 12.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>104</sup> Browne to William H. Seward, November 25, 1868 in ADP: ARC I, 78.

minds of the American public and officials after Burlingame's mission. To be sure, too, Burlingame's actions did accrue some diplomatic capital for the United States in later years. In his initial meeting with Grant, Prince Gong began his pitch for the former president's good offices by mentioning how China could "never forget the services rendered" by Burlingame.<sup>105</sup> Gong perhaps hoped that Grant, by presenting China's case to Japan, could make a similar contribution.

Burlingame was not the only American on good terms with the Qing government. Kenneth Folsom has noted the special position held by foreigners in Li Hongzhang's *mufu* 幕府 (lit. "tent government") of advisers.<sup>106</sup> Among the foreigners in Li's inner circle, American William N. Pethick was perhaps the closest to Li.<sup>107</sup> Pethick had served at the end of the U.S. Civil War in a New York cavalry regiment. Upon the conclusion of the war, Pethick almost immediately applied for his passport and moved to China, where he became an accomplished linguist and scholar of Chinese literature. From 1872-1894, Pethick was the Vice-Consul and Interpreter at the American consulate in Tianjin, concomitantly serving as one of Li's private secretaries. Folsom claims that during Pethick's long association with Li, Pethick read "no less than 800 English, French, and German books" to the governor-general, tutored Li's children, recruited other potential foreign advisers for Li, accompanied foreign engineers and experts on mining surveys, and generally kept Li informed of the happenings in Tianjin's foreign and diplomatic

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<sup>105</sup> "Conversation with Prince Kung," June 8, 1879, Grant Papers 29:151.

<sup>106</sup> Folsom defines the *mufu* system as "the system of privately hired provincial advisers which flourished at various periods in Chinese history" (Folsom 33). In the Qing period, members of the *mufu* did not hold government office, but were private advisers to officials and sometimes included foreigners.

<sup>107</sup> In a dispatch to U.S. Secretary of State William Evarts while negotiating the Angell Treaty, James Angell described Pethick's relationship with Li as "close and confidential, perhaps we may say official or semi-official." (Angell to Evarts, December 3, 1880 in U.S. Department of State, *Index to the executive documents of the House of Representatives for the first session of the forty-seventh Congress, 1880-81*, 216)

community.<sup>108</sup> Pethick's dual roles of American diplomatic official and adviser to one of the most powerful men in China came to the forefront in the Ryukyu dispute. With Li facing few other options at resolving the Ryukyu matter satisfactorily, it was Pethick who suggested that China might have a new foreign friend in the arrival of former U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant.<sup>109</sup>

### **3.3 China's New Friend? The Arrival of Ulysses S. Grant**

On May 17, 1877, barely two months' removed from his final term as President of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant, along with his wife Julia Dent Grant (1826-1902) and son Jesse Grant (1858-1934), sailed from Philadelphia aboard the American steamship *Indiana* bound for Liverpool, England.<sup>110</sup> It was the beginning of a more than two-year world tour that would take Grant through the British Isles, Europe, the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia, and, finally, China and Japan.

Grant arrived in China at the treaty port of Canton, on May 6, 1879. To that point, he was probably the most prestigious Western political figure to visit the Middle Kingdom. His past achievements – a former U.S. President and the winning general in the U.S. Civil War – called for a sort of hero's welcome throughout his travels in China.<sup>111</sup> From Canton, he proceeded to Amoy (Xiamen), Shanghai, Tianjin, and Beijing.

Shortly after arriving in Tianjin, where Li was stationed, the subject of the Ryukyu dispute between China and Japan was mentioned to Grant. In Li's eyes, Grant

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<sup>108</sup> Folsom 153-155. At the time of his death in 1901, Pethick was apparently in the midst of writing a much-anticipated biography of Li. The manuscript was never found.

<sup>109</sup> Hunt 118-119.

<sup>110</sup> Another son, Frederick Grant (1850-1912), later joined them on the trip.

<sup>111</sup> According to Young, hundreds of thousands of Chinese lined the street upon Grant's arrival in a new city. One poster in Canton lauded the visit from the "King of the United States." (John Russell Young, *Around the World with General Grant*, vol. 2 [New York: American News, 1879], 312-317.)

could make the ideal mediator of the dispute. His status as a former U.S. President warranted immediate respect from both sides of the dispute. Furthermore, Grant's reputation for holding anti-imperialist sentiments was promising. The following section examines Grant's background and why China sought his mediation in the controversy over Ryukyu.

### **Grant's Background**

Ulysses S. Grant was born April 27, 1822 in Point Pleasant, Ohio along the Ohio River. While he was still an infant, his family moved to nearby Georgetown, Ohio, where he remained until he left for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1839. According to his memoirs, Grant was not particularly enamored with the idea of being a career soldier, but military life provided a way for him to engage in one of his favorite pastimes: travel. Prior to leaving Ohio, he claimed already to be the "best-travelled boy in Georgetown" and admitted that part of the appeal of attending West Point was the opportunity to visit two of America's biggest cities – Philadelphia and New York City.<sup>112</sup>

After graduating from West Point, Grant served in the Mexican War (1846-1848),<sup>113</sup> then was sent to the Pacific Coast, where he might have first encountered a significant Chinese population while stationed there from 1852 to 1854. By the end of Grant's time in the American West – far from his wife and infant son – he was tired of being a professional soldier. He resigned his military commission and moved to Missouri

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<sup>112</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1885), 10. (hereafter, Grant, *Memoirs*).

<sup>113</sup> Grant claimed to have opposed the war, describing it as "one of the most unjust (wars) every waged by a stronger against a weaker nation. It was an instance of a republic following the bad example of European monarchies, in not considering justice in their desire to acquire additional territory." He later blamed the war as an underlying cause of the U.S. Civil War. (Grant, *Memoirs* 18-20).

and then Illinois, where he joined his father's tannery business. He might have lived out his days in relative obscurity were it not for the American Civil War (1861-1865), through which Grant achieved enduring fame by leading the Union troops to victory and accepting Confederate General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House in April 1865. Grant parlayed his military exploits into a successful presidential bid in 1868, entering office as the 18th President of the United States on March 4, 1869.

### **Grant and East Asia**

Perhaps more than any previous U.S. President, Grant took a special interest in American policy in East Asia. Much of the interest was economically driven. During his first year in office, the transcontinental railroad – built in part by Chinese immigrant workers – was completed across North America, immediately improving the possibilities of U.S. commercial activity across the Pacific. In addition, the idea of a canal across the Central America isthmus connecting the Atlantic and Pacific gained momentum during Grant's tenure.<sup>114</sup> An economic depression in 1873 further highlighted the role that Asia could play in America's future economic health.

Of Grant's eight Annual Messages given as President,<sup>115</sup> China was mentioned in all but the last one. In his first message, Grant suggested that China and Japan "should receive our special attention. It will be the endeavor of the Administration to cultivate such relations with all these nations as to entitle us to their confidence, and make it their

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<sup>114</sup> On March 10, 1872 Grant appointed the first Inter-oceanic Canal Commission to research three canal plans that had been proposed to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

<sup>115</sup> Given in writing, not in speech as is the case now.

as well as our interest to establish better Commercial relations.”<sup>116</sup> Grant also recommended that the U.S. diplomatic mission in China be promoted to first class.

It was during Grant’s presidency that the effect of the Burlingame Treaty signed in July 1868 took full effect – fortuitous timing in enhancing Grant’s reputation among Chinese officials. The most visible sign of the treaty in the United States was the influx of Chinese workers during Grant’s tenure. In 1869, Grant’s first year in office, there were 77,000 Chinese in the United States. A decade later, the number had swelled to nearly 200,000.<sup>117</sup> Later, during his world tour, Grant was praised by Chinese in Hong Kong for allowing such an increase of Chinese in the United States, which, in the minds of some Chinese officials, signified American goodwill toward China: “We have been delighted to find that, in international questions you have shown a spirit of impartiality and fairness, treating Americans and Foreigners alike; and the Chinese who have been trading in the United States have sung, and continue to sing, praises of the many good actions done by you while in office.”<sup>118</sup> The Chinese immigrants were a frequent topic when Grant discussed China, both during his presidency and after. Grant believed that many of the Chinese coming to America were forced to do so and had a status hardly better than the slaves Grant had fought to free in the American Civil War.<sup>119</sup>

Japan also drew the attention of Grant and American observers in the 1870s. During Grant’s first term, Japanese diplomatic representation in the United States was

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<sup>116</sup> “Annual Message,” December 6, 1869, Grant Papers 21:36.

<sup>117</sup> Robert Barde et al., eds., “Immigrants, by Country of Last Residence - Asia: 1820-1997,” Table Ad 136-148 in Susan B. Carter et al., eds., *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition* (New York: Cambridge University, 2006), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/>.

<sup>118</sup> *Hongkong Government Gazette*, May 14, 1879, Grant Papers 29:127.

<sup>119</sup> See Grant’s Annual Messages from 1869, 1873, 1874, and 1875. Grant later used the issue as a bargaining chip with Li in agreeing to mediate the Ryukyu controversy.



established and Grant received the Iwakura Mission (1871-1873)<sup>120</sup> at the White House in March 1872. Japan's rapid reforms caught the eye of Westerners, including longtime U.S. Minister to Japan John Bingham (1815-1900), who wrote in a letter to Grant in 1874 that Japan "is the key to the future commerce with the East." Bingham suggested that increasing American economic ties with Japan could later pay dividends in increasing American influence over all of East Asia.<sup>121</sup>

Li and his fellow Chinese leaders' perception of friendly relations between the United States and Japan seemed to contribute to the decision to request Grant's assistance in 1879. "I hope I can persuade General Grant to visit Beijing," Li wrote to officials in the capital, "so that you will get acquainted with him and establish cordial relations. His mediation may be helpful in the current issue with Japan and Ryukyu. The Japanese really look up to the Americans and General Grant is the foremost among them." 伊自酌將來擬仍慫恿入都一游庶尊處藉得把晤相機聯絡或為他日公評日球近事之一助日人實奉美國為護符而格將軍尤美之達尊眾望所歸也。<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> The Iwakura Mission was a Japanese diplomatic mission led by Iwakura Tomomi (1825-1883). Representing the new Meiji government, the mission visited governments around the world with the goals of cultivating friendly relations, acquiring knowledge of Western diplomatic norms, culture, and education, and demonstrating Japanese efforts at Western-friendly reform (with the long-term objective of preparing the way for revision of the unequal treaties imposed on Japan).

<sup>121</sup> Bingham to Grant, Grant Letters 24:462-3. Thomas Walsh, one of the largest American merchants in Japan (and the son-in-law of New York Governor John A. Dix), also perceived a Japanese preference for Americans, whose good reputation had first been established by Townsend Harris, the American diplomat and merchant who negotiated the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between the United States and Japan in 1858 (also known as the Harris Treaty). Writing Grant in 1871, Walsh claimed that Harris' "counsel was preferred to that of any other foreign representative; and American influence surpassed that of any foreign nation. The Japanese learned to trust him and his countrymen, and to feel that in them they had friends who were, as a rule, honorable and considerate, both in their dealings, and in their conduct." (Walsh to Grant, November 7, 1871, Grant Papers 21:311n).

<sup>122</sup> Li Hongzhang, "Yi jiedai Meiguo qianzongtong" 議接待美國前總統 (Discussion of Welcoming the former U.S. President), May 11, 1879, YSHG 8:36 (206); Modified translation of Leung, "General Ulysses S. Grant and the Sino-Japanese Dispute over the Ryukyu (Liu-ch'iu) Islands," 424.

In looking to Grant for help in resolving the Ryukyu dispute, China saw a former U.S. President whose track record suggested he might be sympathetic to China's claims (and whose country might be considered the "best among a bad lot of barbarians" in China's eyes at the time) and yet was also on good terms with Japan.<sup>123</sup> In addition to the more open immigration policy practiced during his administration, Grant at times displayed an anti-imperialist, internationalist (and perhaps idealistic), bent, such as seen in his second inaugural address in which he stated that he thought "our great Maker is preparing the world, in his own good time, to become one nation, speaking one language, and when armies and navies will no longer be required."<sup>124</sup> Indeed, in his travel diary from his time in China, Grant condemned the unequal treaties that the Western powers had imposed on the Qing dynasty, writing that, he "would not blame (the Chinese) if they were to drive out all Europeans – Americans included – and make new treaties in which they would claim equal rights."<sup>125</sup> Of course, that Grant recognized the unfairness of the treaties governing China's foreign relations with the Western powers is one thing. Whether he viewed the Ryukyu controversy in a similar light is another.

### 3.4 Summary

In China's effort to resolve the dispute with Japan over Ryukyu, Qing leaders implemented some relatively innovative diplomatic strategies, such as appealing to international law and the power of global public opinion. A related part of China's strategy was to use the power and prestige of the United States and Ulysses S. Grant in

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<sup>123</sup> Hendrickson 282. Hunt uses similar wording to describe Sino-U.S. relations at the time (Hunt 115).

<sup>124</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, "Inaugural Address," March 4, 1873, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25821> (Accessed February 1, 2014).

<sup>125</sup> "Travel Diary," May 5, 1879, Grant Papers 29:82.

order to pressure Japan to respond more positively to Chinese pleas to negotiate a solution to the Ryukyus' status.

The history of Sino-U.S. relations leading up to Grant's visit in 1879 is filled with enigmas. The United States, like the other Western powers, had signed unequal treaties with the Qing dynasty in the wake of the Opium Wars. The United States, however, was not an active aggressor against China in the wars, but rather an interested bystander who shared in the advantages procured by the British and French. Though this "jackal imperialism" was recognized by Chinese officials, the United States – by maintaining an official policy of neutrality – was viewed more positively by Qing officials.

This positive impression was reinforced by the actions of certain individual Americans who worked with the Qing in its efforts to implement diplomatic reforms. Most notably, the actions of Anson Burlingame, as leader of the Qing-sent Burlingame Mission, contributed to enhancing the image of the United States in China. The Sino-U.S. treaty addendum brokered by Burlingame on China's behalf led to an influx of Chinese immigrants to America during Grant's presidency, thus also elevating Grant's popularity in China. Grant's anti-imperialist, internationalist reputation, as well as the United States' relationship with Japan, convinced Li Hongzhang that he might be an ideal candidate to serve as intermediary between China and Japan in the Ryukyu dispute of 1879.

## Chapter 4

### **Between China and Japan: Grant's Mediation of the Ryukyu Crisis**

Former U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant arrived in China on May 6, 1879. He toured Canton, Amoy (Xiamen), and Shanghai before proceeding to Tianjin and Beijing. Less than two months' prior to his arrival, Japan had officially annexed the Ryukyu Islands and China was running out of feasible options with which to favorably resolve the matter. Li Hongzhang's American interpreter, William N. Pethick – a Civil War veteran from New York – suggested to Li that Grant might make for a powerful mediating presence in the Ryukyu dispute. It was worth a shot.

This chapter narrates Grant's mediation in the dispute between China and Japan over the Ryukyu Islands. Grant heard the Chinese side of the case from Prince Gong in Beijing and Li Hongzhang in Tianjin. While agreeing to mediate the dispute, the former president also leveraged his willingness to help to address the Chinese immigrant issue in America. After hearing the Japanese claims, Grant tendered a letter to both sides offering his advice on how to resolve the situation. As will be seen, Grant – in line with official U.S. foreign policy of the time – seems to have made a game effort at remaining impartial in the dispute, perhaps to the chagrin of Chinese officials who had hoped for more favorable treatment. Still, Li told U.S. Consul Owen Denny (1838-1900) that Grant's efforts had given him hope that a solution could be reached that would “at least ‘save face’ for China.”<sup>126</sup> The two countries followed Grant's advice and met to negotiate a compromise in 1880.

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<sup>126</sup> Quoted in a letter from Denny to Grant, August 23, 1879, Grant Papers 29:216.

#### 4.1 Grant hears the China's Case

Grant's itinerary in North China included a brief stop in Tianjin on the way to Beijing, then a return visit in Tianjin before departing for Japan in mid-June. Upon Grant's initial arrival in Tianjin, the subject of mediating the Ryukyu dispute was broached with Grant via Pethick.<sup>127</sup> Proceeding to Beijing, Grant met with Prince Gong, who Grant described after their first meeting on June 5 as "very affable and apparently very strongly inclined to cultivate the most friendly relations with the U.S."<sup>128</sup>

At a meeting on June 8, Gong told Grant that, "China has always been treated well by your country, and never more so than under your administration,"<sup>129</sup> perhaps in reference to the relatively liberal immigration policy for Chinese during Grant's presidency.<sup>130</sup> Gong then began to raise the Ryukyu issue in earnest. According to Grant, Gong "was most anxious that I should act the part of Pacificator between his country and Japan. I believe he feels so anxiously about the matter that he would agree, if Japan would, that my decision should govern both nations in regard to their territorial difficulties."<sup>131</sup> Here might be some of the first evidence of what U.S. Minister George F. Seward (1840-1910) later referred to as a possible misunderstanding by Qing officials regarding the differences between mediation and arbitration.<sup>132</sup> Or perhaps there was no misunderstanding at all. It seems that China really did hope to use Grant as the (sympathetic to China) arbitrator of the case, believing he might be partial to China's side

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<sup>127</sup> Li Hongzhang, "Yiqing Meiguo qianzongtong tiaochu Liuqiushi" 議請美國前總統調處琉球事 (Discussion about asking the former U.S. President to mediate the Ryukyu matter), June 13, 1879, YSHG 8:39 (208).

<sup>128</sup> "Travel Diary," Grant Papers 29:86.

<sup>129</sup> "Conversation with Prince Kung," June 8, 1879, Grant Papers 29:151.

<sup>130</sup> The policy was a result of the Burlingame Treaty signed in 1868, the year before Grant took office.

<sup>131</sup> "Travel Diary," Grant Papers 29:86.

<sup>132</sup> "Seward to Evarts," December 24, 1879, ADP: SJ-II, 175. The Chinese term *tiaochu* 調處 used in the official documents could be translated as either mediate or arbitrate.

of the case. Once it was suggested that allowing the case to be settled by arbitration and the norms of international law would probably lead to an unfavorable result for China (due especially to the wording of the Peking Agreement referring to Ryukyuan as Japanese subjects), Qing officials said they preferred mediation over arbitration.<sup>133</sup>

In his meeting with Gong, Grant, while stating his willingness to help the dispute reach a peaceful conclusion, twice pointed out to the prince his status as a private citizen, not an official representative of the U.S. government. Gong, however, was undeterred, noting that Grant's influence "was vast" and that Grant's imminent visit to Japan gave China an "opportunity that we cannot overlook" to resolve the Ryukyu crisis.<sup>134</sup> After all, Gong, said, "We have a proverb in Chinese that, 'No business is business.' In other words, that real affairs are more frequently transacted informally, when persons meet, as we are meeting now, over a table of entertainment for social and friendly conversation than in solemn business sessions at the Yamen."<sup>135</sup>

As the conversation drew to a close, Grant tried to hone down the particulars of China's goals in the mediation:

*Grant:* What action on the part of Japan would satisfy China?

*Prince Gong:* We would be satisfied with the situation as it was.

*Grant:* That is to say, Loochoo (Ryukyu) paying tribute to Japan and China.

*Prince Gong:* We do not concern ourselves with what tribute the King of Loochoo pays to Japan or any other Power...We desire Japan to restore the King she has captured and taken away, to withdraw her troops from Loochoo and abandon her claims to exclusive sovereignty over the island...Other questions are open to negotiation and debate.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> "Minute of a conversation between the (Chinese) Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Holcombe," January 12, 1880, ADP: SJ-II, 188.

<sup>134</sup> "Conversation with Prince Kung," June 8, 1879, Grant Papers 29:152. The conversations among Gong, Grant, and Li are recorded in Grant Papers as well as Young's *Around the World*.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 157. Later, when negotiations between Japan and China began in August 1880, Qing officials hoped for a three-way division of the islands, with Japan attaining the northernmost islands, Ryukyu keeping the main island of Okinawa, and China acquiring the southernmost islands nearest Taiwan.



Image 4.1 Ulysses S. Grant and Li Hongzhang pose for a photo during Grant's tour of China in 1879. (Source: "Ulysses S. Grant & Li Hung Chang, Tientsin, China 1879," Wikimedia Commons, November 5, 2009, accessed March 3, 2014, <http://commons.wikimedia.org>.)

In other words, China hoped to reinstate the previous arrangement of Ryukyu submitting to both China and Japan.

After returning to Tianjin, Grant met with Li during his final days in China and continued to discuss the Ryukyu case. As he had done with other foreigners, Li the diplomat made a strong impression on Grant. Some foreign diplomats called Li the "Bismarck of the East,"<sup>137</sup> in reference to Prussian statesman Otto von Bismarck (1815-

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<sup>137</sup> Kwang-Ching Liu, "The Confucian as Patriot and Pragmatist: Li Hung-chang's Formative Years, 1823-1866," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 30 (1970): 6.

1898). Grant went a step further, ranking Li above Bismarck, as well as above Great Britain's Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), and France's Léon Gambetta (1838-1882).<sup>138</sup>

Li and Grant formed a quick bond. Both of the men, Li pointed out, had helped quell massive rebellions that threatened to tear their two respective countries apart. Both had also parlayed their military success into positions of great political authority. It was clear to observers that the two men enjoyed each other's company. Noting the charisma between his father and Li, Grant's son Frederick Dent Grant wrote that, "His Highness [Li] seemed to feel that he and General Grant were kindred in spirit and mind."<sup>139</sup>

Like Prince Gong, Li Hongzhang was hopeful that Grant's political and military accomplishments would weigh heavily in eliciting a positive response from Japan. According to Li, if Grant chose to speak on a subject, he "would speak with an authority greater than that of any diplomatist. There were men to whose words nations would listen and the General was one of those men."<sup>140</sup>

Li's plea for mediation stressed his views that Japan was in violation of international law by deposing the Ryukyu king while also alluding to the possibility that a Sino-Japanese War would disrupt commerce in East Asia.<sup>141</sup> To support his appeal to international law, Li quoted to Grant several treaties that he thought applied in the Ryukyu dispute. He first read a clause from the Treaty of Tianjin of 1858 between the United States and China regarding the use of the United States' good offices to help resolve disputes between China and other countries. After Grant agreed that the Ryukyu

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<sup>138</sup> Young, *Men and Memories*, 303.

<sup>139</sup> Frederick D. Grant, "Li Hung Chang and General Grant," *Outlook* 54 (August 29, 1896): 367.

<sup>140</sup> "Conversations with Li Hung-chang," June 12-14, 1879, Grant Papers 29:164.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.* 29:164-167.



case probably was within the scope of the clause,<sup>142</sup> Li then read from the Burlingame Treaty of 1868 and the 1871 treaty between Japan and China, which stated that neither country should invade the territory of the other. Finally, he read from an 1853 treaty between Ryukyu and the United States to show that the U.S. had previously acknowledged Ryukyu as an independent country. Li cited all of the above to frame China's claim in the context of international law. In Li's eyes, Japan's actions violated the 1871 treaty and therefore Japan should be forced to submit to the legal demands as enforced by other powers. "Otherwise," he told Grant, "there was no use of that international law which foreign nations are always quoting to China."<sup>143</sup>

Grant admitted that Li's argument seemed sound, before adding the foreboding caveat that the issue would ultimately be resolved by diplomacy. Grant did seek to clarify one apparent contradiction in Li's presentation, however. In quoting the treaty between Japan and China, Li seemed to claim that Ryukyu was Chinese territory. In quoting the treaty between the United States and Ryukyu, however, Li argued that Ryukyu was an independent country. Li tried to explain by stating that, "To be entirely accurate Loochoo (Ryukyu) should be described as a semi-dependent power." China did not exercise sovereignty over the island kingdom, but "was as much concerned in the maintenance of the independence of a Power holding toward her coasts the relations of Loochoo as in the integrity of her inland territory."<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> U.S. Secretary of State William Evarts later rebutted this line of thought, which had also been reflected in U.S. Minister to China George F. Seward's reports on the Ryukyu situation: "The Chinese request was based on an erroneous interpretation of an existing provision of treaty and looked to the intermediation of the United States without respect to any like request on the part of Japan." Evarts reminded Seward that the U.S. "must occupy a position of unquestioned impartiality, leaning neither to the one side or to the other." (Evarts to Seward, March 4, 1880, ADP: SJ-II, 218-219.)

<sup>143</sup> "Conversations with Li Hung-chang," June 12-14, 1879, Grant Papers 29:164.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 165.

Some of Li's other pleas for Grant's involvement were based on geography. First, by controlling the complete length of the Ryukyu Islands, Japan would block vital shipping lanes leading to North China. Li predicted such a situation would be a "menace" to Chinese commerce. The second geographical concern was the Ryukyus' proximity to Taiwan. Possession of Ryukyu would pose a grave threat to China's national security by bringing Japan "within a step of Formosa [Taiwan], which is but a step from our coasts," said Li.<sup>145</sup> Maps clearly drove home the point, which, as Li told Gong in a letter on June 13, was also made by Robert Hart (1835-1911), the British official who was the longtime Inspector-General of China's Imperial Maritime Customs Service.

Hart says that Ryukyu won't be enough, but that Japan will also cause trouble in Taiwan, which later will certainly cause future trouble for China. 赫德 (Hart) 謂球事不充，日本就要有事臺灣，後患固在意中。<sup>146</sup>

Li also hinted at the possibility of a third presidential run for Grant during his time with the former president. By the time Grant arrived in China in May 1879, rumblings were growing louder that Grant might seek a third term in 1880.<sup>147</sup> What could be better publicity for a presidential candidate than defusing a potential war between China and Japan (thus also stifling the greed of the European powers whom Grant was sure would take advantage if war did break out between the two East Asian countries)?<sup>148</sup> In the short-term, Li hoped that Grant's potential aspirations might make it more likely that Grant would be willing to mediate the Ryukyu dispute. Longer term, Li hoped the

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>146</sup> Li Hongzhang, "Yiqing Meiguo," YSHG 8:40 (209).

<sup>147</sup> The possibility of Grant running again was alluded to in a letter from William Tecumseh Sherman on July 17, 1879 (Grant Papers 29:137-139). Publicly, Grant was deferential whenever the topic was broached, but his name was definitely in the running at the Republican Convention in 1880. The nomination, however, went to James A. Garfield.

<sup>148</sup> It should be remembered here, too, that Young was providing glowing accounts to the American public (via the *New York Herald*, mainly) of Grant's enthusiastic reception at every stop of the trip.

relationship he had cultivated with Grant would pay bigger dividends for China. Should Grant regain the presidency, Li and the Qing dynasty would have a sympathetic ear in the White House. This possibility was sweetened a few months later when Li received letters from Young that mentioned the possibility of some type of Sino-U.S. alliance. It is unclear exactly what type of alliance Young proposed (Li described it as a an “offensive and defensive alliance”). According to Li, it was “somewhat similar” to terms in the first article of the Treaty of 1858, but “more plain and positive.” Li hoped the proposal would come to fruition and told Young that if Grant became president again, “the plan would be certain of success.”<sup>149</sup>

Gong and Li also tried to tap into American commercial motives in requesting Grant’s mediation. During Grant’s presidency, whenever he mentioned China or Japan, it was often in the context of economic potential that might benefit the United States. His travels in East Asia in 1879 did nothing to stifle those projections. In February 1881, Grant wrote to President-elect James A. Garfield that his “travels in the East convinced me that there was a large opening in that direction for an extension of our commerce...All those countries except India prefer purchasing from us. This is because as a Nation, we treat these peoples, at their own homes, as if they had rights which we were bound to respect.”<sup>150</sup> It was no secret that Americans hoped to expand their economic interests in East Asia. Thus, in outlining the importance of the Ryukyu crisis, Gong mentioned that a Sino-Japanese War would be detrimental to trade in the region.<sup>151</sup> As will be seen in Grant’s later discussions with Japan and during the negotiations

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<sup>149</sup> Li to Young, September 24, 1879, translation in ADP: SJ-II 68.

<sup>150</sup> Grant to Garfield, February 18, 1881, Grant Papers 30:149.

<sup>151</sup> “Conversation with Prince Kung,” June 8, 1879, Grant Papers 29:154.

between China and Japan in 1880, it was the combination of economic and geographic concerns that perhaps formed China's strongest basis for protesting Ryukyu's status.

### **Grant's bargaining chip: Chinese immigrants in the U.S.**

It was during his meetings with Li that Grant presented his own diplomatic request. In exchange for mediating the Ryukyu controversy, Grant hoped Li might make some concessions regarding Chinese emigrants to the United States. In recent decades, the surge of mining activity in California and the building of the transcontinental railroad across the American West had triggered a flood of Chinese emigrants to America. During Grant's presidency, more than 100,000 Chinese entered the United States.<sup>152</sup>

The influx of Chinese into the Western U.S. led some American settlers to call for a policy of exclusion of Chinese from the region. Sentiments such as those of Elko, Nevada resident T.N. Stone, who wrote to Grant in April 1876 and described Chinese workers as "aliens and enemies to civilization...dangerous propagators of disease," were not uncommon. In addition to racial prejudice, Stone and others also feared the effect of Chinese laborers on job opportunities for white settlers to the region.<sup>153</sup> Calls for national legislation increased, resulting in the Chinese labor issue being included in the national platform of both political parties in the 1876 and 1880 Presidential elections.<sup>154</sup>

Grant's Republican Party took much of the heat for its relatively more open stance on the issue. Given the opportunity to meet with Li Hongzhang, one of China's

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<sup>152</sup> Barde, "Immigrants, by Country of Last Residence - Asia: 1820-1997." The increase in the Chinese population in the U.S. under Grant was the largest such increase until Ronald Reagan's tenure (1981-1989).

<sup>153</sup> Stone to Grant, April 24, 1876, Grant Letters 27:6.

<sup>154</sup> According to Foster Rhea Dulles, James Garfield lost California in the 1880 election due to his more liberal immigration policy toward the Chinese workers. See Foster Rhea Dulles, *China and America; the Story of Their Relations since 1784* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946), 87.

most powerful political figures, Grant realized his help in the Ryukyu controversy might also be an opportunity to ask for assistance from the Chinese side in solving the Chinese immigrant issue in the United States (and thus benefit his Republican Party's future political prospects). To justify his request, Grant told Li that Chinese working in America were akin to slaves.<sup>155</sup>

Without Li's help in stemming the tide of Chinese immigrants to America, the United States faced a major hurdle in limiting Chinese immigration: Article 5 of the Burlingame Treaty of 1868, which allowed for free migration between China and the United States. After meeting with Grant on June 13, Li told Gong that he hoped both issues (Ryukyu and the Chinese immigrants) "could be resolved successfully" (兩事議成) and hinted that he was willing to make adjustments from the Chinese side if Grant was willing to help mediate the crisis with Japan.

Hongzhang replied and asked [Pethick] to secretly let Mr. Grant know that if he could help settle the Ryukyu matter, then we can discuss the issue of the Chinese workers...(Directly addressing Prince Gong) The Ryukyu issue is more important, [but] since we hope the foreigners [Americans] could make efforts on our behalf, it seems there is no harm in being flexible, don't you think? 鴻章復屬其密告格君，如能將球事議妥，華工總好商量...球事關係較重，既欲外人盡力，似不妨略予通融，卓見以為何如？<sup>156</sup>

Grant suggested a three-to-five year halt in new Chinese emigrants to allow for tensions between white settlers and Chinese immigrants to cool down. Li agreed that might be possible.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> "Conversations with Li Hung-chang," Grant Letters 29:159.

<sup>156</sup> Li Hongzhang, "Yiqing Meiguo," YSHG 8:40 (209).

<sup>157</sup> Grant Letters 29:159; YSGH 8:40. Li's concession eventually resulted in the United States sending a three-person delegation led by James Angell to renegotiate some of the language of the Burlingame Treaty. The result was the Angell Treaty signed in 1882, which stated that the U.S. could "regulate, limit, or

More important to Li in the short-term, however, was that Grant was willing to mediate the Ryukyu dispute. In the same letter to Gong, Li wrote that Grant “appears to be deeply concerned and not willing to shirk his responsibility” 其於球事甚相關切尚無推諉 regarding Ryukyu. “Whether or not Japan will listen [to Grant’s mediation], of course, we can’t know, but we think when the General arrives in Japan, he will certainly speak on our behalf.” 日本能否聽後，固未可知，想伊到東必可從旁關說。<sup>158</sup>

#### 4.2 Grant in Japan

On June 15, 1879, Grant left Beijing, sailed to where the Great Wall meets the Gulf of Bohai at Shanhaiguan, and then headed to Japan, arriving in Nagasaki on June 21.<sup>159</sup> Like the Ryukyu officials had done in recent years, Grant visited hospitals, newly built schools, and reviewed the Japanese military. He was impressed with what he saw of the rapidly modernizing country. “Japan is striving to be both liberal and enlightened. She deserves success for her efforts are honest and in the interest of the whole people,” he wrote in his travel diary.<sup>160</sup>

Grant’s arrival in Japan introduced a new factor into the Ryukyu equation. Prior to Grant’s coming, Japan had never seemed open to settling the matter by means of negotiation.<sup>161</sup> Grant’s visit, however, was deemed a matter of high priority to Japanese officials. Pamphlets and penny tracts describing Grant’s military accomplishments were

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suspend, but not absolutely prohibit” the entry of Chinese laborers. From this point, Chinese emigration to the U.S. was sharply curbed. (U.S. Statutes at Large 22 (1881), 826)

<sup>158</sup> Li Hongzhang, “Yiqing Meiguo,” YSHG 8:40 (209).

<sup>159</sup> Grant stayed in contact with Qing officials throughout his time in Japan. After his meetings with Japanese officials in July and August, he wrote Prince Gong and Japanese Prime Minister Iwakura Tomomi with his final recommendations on how to settle the dispute (See page 64 of this thesis).

<sup>160</sup> “Travel Diary,” Grant Papers 29:91.

<sup>161</sup> Richard T. Chang, “General Grant's 1879 Visit to Japan,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 24, no. 4 (1969): 380.

disseminated to the Japanese public. Engravings of the former President's image could be seen in shop windows.<sup>162</sup> As Li and Gong had hoped, if Grant raised the matter of Ryukyu, Japan could no longer ignore China.

On July 22, 1879 Grant held a conference at the Japanese resort town of Nikko with the Japanese Minister of the Interior Ito Hirobumi (1841-1909), Minister of War Saigo Tsugumichi (1843-1902), and Japanese envoy to the United States Kironari Yoshida (1845-1891) to discuss the Ryukyu question. While acknowledging that Japan had a valid case for claiming Ryukyu,<sup>163</sup> Grant also pointed out that China feared Japan's actions in Ryukyu were the prelude to a move on Taiwan. Furthermore, Grant mentioned that a complete takeover of the islands by Japan would result in the blocking of shipping lanes vital to trade in North China.<sup>164</sup> In light of these concerns and Japan's superior military technology, Grant urged the Japanese leaders to act "in a spirit of magnanimity" and make a few concessions to China. In the end, Grant's mediation came down to three main points, which he outlined in a letter to Prince Gong and Japanese Prime Minister Iwakura Tomomi (1825-1883) on August 13, 1879:<sup>165</sup>

1. China should rescind the offensive communications sent by He Ruzhang in 1878.
2. Neither side should let the European powers get involved.
3. Each side should form a special commission to meet and work out an agreement in order to preserve the peace.

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>163</sup> Indeed, Grant later told the Japanese Emperor on August 10 that he could see "how impossible it is for Japan to recede from her position." ("Conversation with Emperor Meiji," Grant Papers 29:203).

<sup>164</sup> Conversation with Emperor Meiji," Grant Papers 29:207 n7.

<sup>165</sup> "To Prince Kung and Iwakura Tomomi, Aug. 13, 1879," Grant Papers 29:213-215.

The letter, which Young later credited with preserving peace between China and Japan (for the time being),<sup>166</sup> also included Grant's overall assessments of China and Japan. Grant noted that China and Japan were the only two nations in East Asia "even partially free from the domination and dictation of some one or other of the European powers with intelligence and strength enough to maintain their independence." "With a little more advancement," Grant added, the two countries could "throw off the offensive treaties which now cripple and humiliate them."<sup>167</sup> Grant's comments reflected a commonly held disdain among American officials regarding European imperialism. By differentiating the United States from the European powers, they sought to gain the trust of China and Japan in hopes of reaping future rewards for American trade and commerce. Grant also implied, as other Americans of the era did, that the United States was the model that Japan and China should emulate and the United States would be a willing and sympathetic tutor and protector in the two countries' development.

#### **4.3 Aftermath: Negotiations Break Down**

Grant left Japan on September 3, 1879. He landed in San Francisco two weeks later and toured the western U.S. – including a visit with leaders of the Chinese community in San Francisco – on his way back East. Initially, Grant's limited mediation in the Ryukyu dispute appeared to be successful. China withdrew He Ruzhang's offensive letter and Japan agreed to negotiate with China, much to the pleasure of Li, who expressed his appreciation in a letter to Young on September 24, 1879:

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<sup>166</sup> Young to James Blaine, October 9, 1882, ADP: SJ-II 275-276.

<sup>167</sup> "To Prince Kung and Iwakura Tomomi, Aug. 13, 1879," Grant Papers 29:214.



That General Grant succeeded in inducing the Mikado and his Ministers to listen and give heed to his views regarding the Loo Choo (Ryukyu) affair is very gratifying: were it not for his great reputation for fairness, the Japanese would hardly have been persuaded, and had it not been for your untiring and ceaseless efforts this change of feeling among the Japanese could not have occurred.<sup>168</sup>

Despite Japan's positive response, however, not every Chinese official was as optimistic about Grant's efforts. A memorial from the Zongli Yamen cast doubts on whether Japan would be as pliable as Grant and other officials had reported. To the officials at the Yamen, it sounded too good to be true:

Even though Japan may allow this method (appointing commissioners), it will not be handled by Grant alone. Instead, it will be through the negotiation between officials appointed by China and Japan respectively. Japan is extremely crafty and deceitful. I'm afraid (this matter) won't so easily be resolved. 即使日本允此辦法而未由格蘭忒一手經理, 另由中日兩國派員會商, 日本狡譎已甚, 恐仍未易歸宿。<sup>169</sup>

The memorial proved somewhat prescient in the negotiations that commenced the following summer. The matter was not to be easily resolved, though China shared part of the blame as well.

On August 15, 1880 in Beijing, Japan's ambassador to China Shishido Tamaki (1829-1901) and Prince Gong, along with other officials in the Zongli Yamen, began hammering out a compromise over the status of the Ryukyu Islands. After two months, they had succeeded, or so they thought. Draft treaties were prepared on October 21, with both sides in agreement.

Overall, the treaty was weighted in Japan's favor. Japan would only cede the two southernmost islands of Ryukyu - Miyako and Yaeyama (thus providing an unobstructed

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<sup>168</sup> Li to Young, September 24, 1879, translation, ADP: SJ-II 65.

<sup>169</sup> "Zongli geguo shiwu yamen zou Meitongling Gelante zai Riben shangban Liuqiu shiqingzhe" 總理各國事務衙門奏美統領格蘭忒在日本商辦琉球事情摺 (Zongli Yamen memorial about former U.S. leader Grant discussing the Ryukyu matter in Japan), September 29, 1879, ZRXJ-GX 1:21.

passage to the Pacific Ocean for China). In exchange, Japan would take possession of the remainder of the islands and the 1871 treaty was amended to include most-favored nation status for Japan.<sup>170</sup>

At that point, however, the negotiations turned sour. Officials outside of the Zongli Yamen, including Li Hongzhang, got wind of the treaty's details and the concessions that China was about to make and protested the signing of the treaty. Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837-1909), one of the late Qing dynasty's most influential reformers and officials, was one of the most adamant protesters of the agreement:

If we do not resist an insignificant and suddenly rising Japan, henceforth all countries following close after will imitate her evil example. France will occupy Annam; England will invade Burma and Nepal; and Russia will swallow up Korea. After a few years the surrounding buffer states will be entirely lost. We may delay with other countries but if Korea fell into Russia's hands, it would mean an imminent threat to the two provinces of Fengtian and Jilin on their [Russia's] doorstep; the northern coast of Shandong (Denglai) would also never be able let their guard down. 不敢抗蕞爾暴興之日本後此環海萬國接踵效尤法據越南英襲麵廓俄吞朝鮮數年之後屏藩盡失他國猶緩也朝鮮一為俄有則奉吉兩省患在肘腋之間登萊一道永無解甲之日矣。<sup>171</sup>

Li also thought the treaty unwise, especially as it would involve changing the previous treaty by granting Japan most-favored nation status. He suggested that China delay the settlement of the Ryukyu question for the time being.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> The Chinese version draft treaty can be found in ZRXJ-GX 1:29-30. The English text of the proposed treaty is included in Francis Brinkley, "The Story of the Ryukyu Complication" (1883), in *The Demise of the Ryukyu Kingdom: Western Accounts and Controversy*, by Eitetsu Yamaguchi and Yūkō Arakawa (Ginowan-City, Okinawa, Japan: Yojushorin, 2002), 180-183.

<sup>171</sup> Zhang Zhidong, "Zuo Shuzi Zhang Zhidong zou Liuquian yishen huanjizhe" 左庶子張之洞奏琉球案宜審緩急摺 (Zhang Zhidong memorial regarding the Ryukyu case that is pressing), in *Qingji waijiao shiliao quanshu* 清季外交史料全書 (Late Qing diplomatic and historical materials), vol. 7 (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 1999), 24:1, 1684; Modified translation of Kublin 230-231.

<sup>172</sup> Li Hongzhang, "Zhili zongdu Li Hongzhang fuzou Qiu'an yi huanyunzhe" 直隸總督李鴻章復奏琉球案宜緩允摺 (Zhili Governor-general Li Hongzhang's reply about the Liuqu case, delay allowing [Liuqu] to be broken), November 11, 1880 ZRXJ-GX 1:37-42.

When negotiations got under way in August 1880, China had hoped for a three-way division of the islands, with the northern islands (Amami and Oshima) going to Japan, the southern islands (Yaeyama and Miyako) going to China, and the ones in between (including Okinawa) going to Ryukyu. Although the Zongli Yamen was willing to accept a two-way division between China and Japan and give Japan most-favored nation status, Li was not, especially after an emotional plea from Ryukyuan envoys who argued that the division proposed by Japan was tantamount to the kingdom's destruction.<sup>173</sup> On February 14, 1881, Li wrote Grant, explaining his rejection of the treaty:

An agreement recently entered into by the Japanese Minister and the Zongli Yamen could not be ratified because our Emperor's advisers – and I among them – thought it incompatible with the dignity of China to share in the spoliation of a tributary prince against whom she had no grievance whatsoever. Indeed, China, after protesting against the annexation of Ryukyu by Japan, could not without losing all self-respect and the esteem of the rest of the world suddenly turn around and participate in an act which at the outset she condemned as arbitrary.<sup>174</sup>

With China suddenly backing out of the treaty, Japan also demurred. Negotiations eventually broke off and the Ryukyus' status, to some degree, remained in limbo until the end of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), from which point there was no doubt that the islands would belong to Japan.<sup>175</sup>

#### 4.4 Summary

Grant first heard the Chinese side of the case from Prince Gong in Beijing. Later, he met several times with Li Hongzhang in Tianjin. Grant and Li's budding friendship

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<sup>173</sup> Smits 297.

<sup>174</sup> Grant Letters 29:224n.

<sup>175</sup> Practically speaking, however, Ryukyu was still under Japanese administration during the "limbo years."

strengthened Li's hopes that the former president might be an effective (and sympathetic to China) mediator in the controversy. While agreeing to help mediate the dispute, Grant also requested Li's assistance in addressing Chinese emigration to the U.S., which had become a hot-button political issue in America. After meeting with Japanese officials in July and August 1879, Grant wrote a letter advising the two sides to appoint commissioners to meet and negotiate a solution. The negotiations between China and Japan in 1880 were ultimately unsuccessful and the issue officially remained unresolved, although practically speaking Japan ruled the islands.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion: A world with no friends

American historian Tyler Dennett has noted that islands like the Ryukyus are subject to the “laws of physics in international politics,” that there is a natural tendency to “pull” islands and outlying regions into the orbits of expanding empires.<sup>176</sup> For centuries, the Ryukyu Kingdom had managed to maintain a measure of independence within the orbits of both China and Japan, but with the arrival of Western imperialism in East Asia, such a situation became impossible. The last decades of the 19th century saw a scramble for territory and influence around the globe. Between 1870 and 1900, Great Britain added more than four million square miles to its imperial holdings, followed by France (which added three million), and Germany (one million).<sup>177</sup>

Writing at the time of the Ryukyu crisis, Rutherford Alcock (1809-1897), former British diplomat to China and Japan, described China as “in a very pitiful position at this moment” in reference to the Qing’s military power compared to imperialist powers that might seek to take advantage. “[China] can neither successfully defend their territories against invasion, nor make the Empire feared in attack.”<sup>178</sup> Indeed, some of the imperialist powers’ gains came at China’s expense. After losing Ryukyu to Japan, China soon lost its other tributaries one-by-one: Tonkin and Annam to France in 1885, North Burma to Britain in 1886, Sikkim to Britain in 1890, and finally, Korea, Taiwan, and the Pescadores to Japan in 1895. Despite China not signing the Ryukyu treaty with Japan in

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<sup>176</sup> Dennett 428.

<sup>177</sup> George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 268.

<sup>178</sup> Rutherford Alcock, “China and Its Foreign Relations,” *Contemporary Review* 38 (July-December 1880): 1002.

1880, Zhang Zhidong's fears about the future of China's tributaries were realized anyway.

### **5.1 Why and How China Looked to Grant and the United States**

This study has focused on why and how China reacted to Japan's annexation of Ryukyu by looking to Ulysses S. Grant and the United States. The United States had not joined Britain and France in fighting China in the Opium Wars, though it had benefited from their Western colleagues' victories. America's rhetoric of anti-imperialism was appealing to Chinese leaders looking for an ally in a territorial dispute with imperialistic overtones. American rhetoric was sometimes substantiated by the actions of individuals like Burlingame, Pethick, and even Grant, whose presidency saw the liberal migration of Chinese to America's shores. China also knew that the United States was highly respected by Japan and that Japanese leaders would be forced to listen if Grant raised the Ryukyu issue. In light of these factors, it made sense to some Qing leaders to seek the good offices of Grant and the United States in mediating the Ryukyu dispute with Japan.

In explaining the case to Grant, Li Hongzhang and Prince Gong emphasized the legal and economic aspects of the dispute. They knew that Grant and U.S. diplomats might view China's argument more positively if it was framed in the context of international law. To some degree, the Qing leaders were successful in this aim as the U.S. Ministers to China (George F. Seward) and Japan (John Bingham) both agreed that Japan's actions had crossed the line. Grant thought so as well, though he backtracked some after hearing Japan's side of the argument.

Li and Gong also knew that many of the United States' interests in East Asia were economic in nature. Thus, in requesting Grant's help in the Ryukyu dispute, they pointed out the potential danger to Chinese and American commerce that Japan's annexation of the islands might produce should relations between China and Japan worsen. Although war never seemed like a likely option over Ryukyu, Li and Gong used the possibility of it to stir Grant's interest in the matter.

Li and Gong were right in calculating the diplomatic pressure that Grant's mediation would bring on Japan. After meeting with leaders in Japan over the issue in July 1879, Grant recommended that the two countries appoint commissioners to negotiate a compromise. In response, Japan finally proved willing to meet with China to discuss Ryukyu's status. Ultimately, a combination of factors – Japanese insistence on keeping Okinawa (the main Ryukyu island), pleas from certain Ryukyu officials, and Qing leaders' unwillingness to give Japan most-favored nation status – undermined a satisfactory solution for China, though some historians have pointed out that Grant's mediation was a success in that he at least persuaded Japan to negotiate with China and the two countries avoided war over Ryukyu.<sup>179</sup>

## **5.2 The Significance of the Ryukyu Dispute**

Japan's annexation of Ryukyu in 1879 and China's requesting of American mediation in the territorial dispute highlights several historically significant issues in East Asia in the late 19th century. First, the loss of Ryukyu signaled the imperialism-influenced death knell of the centuries old Sino-centric tributary system in East Asia. Japan's claiming of Ryukyu is indicative of the expanding appetites for land and

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<sup>179</sup> Chang 383; Leung, "General Ulysses S. Grant and the Sino-Japanese Dispute," 444.

influence in the period of heightened imperial expansion that characterized the last decades of the 19th century. Secondly, the Ryukyu crisis reveals how differently Japan and China reacted to the arrival of Western imperialism. Japan imitated the aggressive actions of the Western powers. The lens through which Japanese officials viewed the situation is echoed in comments by former Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Soejima Taneomi in 1885, as he explained the country's plans for expansion in East Asia to a younger colleague who had proposed the idea of an East Asian alliance among Japan, Korea, and possibly China: "What kind of world do you think this is?" Soejima chastised. "It's a world in which strong countries annex weak countries, develop them and make them serve their purposes, and fight over them. To live in a world of struggle like this, we have to build up our military strength. Nobody without military power can stand in a world like this."<sup>180</sup> China was more guarded in its response, though it did try to adapt, as seen in the Ryukyu case and the appeals to international law and public opinion.

Li and other Qing leaders recognized that the Chinese military was not ready for a major conflict yet (nor did it deem Ryukyu worth using military force to retain as a tributary). In lieu of military action, diplomacy was employed to maintain Ryukyu's relationship with China. In regards to the strategies employed by China and China's relations with other states, especially Japan and the United States, the Ryukyu controversy can be seen as a sort of transition point in Qing diplomatic history. Following a decade of increasingly aggressive moves by Japan toward Ryukyu, Qing leaders viewed the Japanese in a different light. Japan was no longer seen as a potential ally, but instead was considered a potential threat.

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<sup>180</sup> Quoted in Marius B. Jansen, "Japanese Views of China," 171.



As for allies, China had to look to other candidates. How the Ryukyu controversy reveals aspects of Sino-U.S. relations at the time has been a primary focus of this paper. First, it shows the impact that individuals had on diplomacy between the two countries. Qing leaders' positive interactions with trusted Americans such as Burlingame and Pethick (to name a couple) influenced how they saw the United States. The impact of Burlingame, Pethick, and Grant on Sino-U.S. relations at the time raises interesting questions regarding the effect that individuals can have on foreign relations. Diplomatic historian Akira Iriye, in an essay about Japan-U.S. relations in the 19th century, has noted that while the "state apparatus" of most nations greatly expanded in the latter part of the century, "there remained large areas where private individuals and associations played more prominent roles in both domestic and foreign affairs."<sup>181</sup>

As Burlingame's actions on behalf of China during the previous decade had continued to resonate with some Qing officials, so Grant's efforts also may have helped color Li's and other Qing officials' perception of the United States as a potential supporter and buffer between China and other imperialist powers. Young noted that when he was U.S. Minister to China – after the Ryukyu negotiations had failed – Li still often requested American good offices when dealing with Tokyo. "It was to our government that he always turned when peace was in peril," Young claimed in his memoirs.<sup>182</sup> In this way, China's turning to Grant and the United States for help in the Ryukyu dispute also reveals some Qing leaders' ill-fated hopes for a more friendly and fruitful diplomatic relationship with the rising Western power. Potential alliances with other countries,

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<sup>181</sup> Akira Iriye, "U.S.-Japanese Relations on the Eve of the St. Louis Exposition," in *Different Lands/shared Experiences: The Emergence of Modern Industrial Society in Japan and the United States*, ed. Joel Glassman and Masato Kimura (Tokyo: Shibusawa Eiichi Memorial Foundation, 2005), 6.

<sup>182</sup> Young, *Men and Memories* 310.

including Japan, had fallen through in the 1870s. China hoped, as it had in the First Opium War, that the United States might provide a counterweight (on China's side) to the more aggressive imperialist countries.

Some within the U.S. diplomatic structure also seemed to be quite open to the idea of increasing American influence in China. U.S. Minister to China George F. Seward thought that Grant's visit would prove to be "of much advantage" to Sino-U.S. relations.<sup>183</sup> It was Seward's opinion that, "America ought not to be without influence here, that her mission may be to redress the balance created otherwise in Asia."<sup>184</sup> As seen in Seward's comments, Americans in China desired to distinguish the United States from the European countries. American motives were not altogether altruistic, of course. By increasing American influence in China, U.S. diplomats hoped to secure advantages (often related to trade) for the United States.

An official American "lean" toward or alliance with China was not possible, however. Most officials in Washington doggedly adhered to the American tradition of neutrality, thus nullifying any chance of the United States aligning with China in East Asia. Compounding this fact was that American officials were impressed with Japan's reforms in the late 19th century. If the hope was to open East Asia up to American commerce, Japan seemed like the more likely partner. Further complicating the possibility of a Sino-U.S. alliance were the exclusion laws aimed at Chinese immigrants that were passed by U.S. Congress in 1882. The laws infuriated Qing leaders, including

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<sup>183</sup> Seward to Evarts, June 23, 1879, in ADP: ARC-I, 236-237.

<sup>184</sup> Seward to Evarts, December 15, 1879, ADP: SJ-II, 108.

Li Hongzhang, who once waved a copy of Wheaton's *Elements of International Law* at Young and rhetorically asked him about the legality of the exclusion laws.<sup>185</sup>

In Young, China had yet another American diplomat sympathetic to China's situation in the international realm. Following his return to the United States with Grant in 1879, Young – aided by Grant's recommendation to U.S. President Chester A. Arthur – was appointed U.S. Minister to China in 1882. Talking with Li in August 1883, Young owned up to America's disingenuous actions in the exclusionary acts while also painting a grim picture for Li in regards to China's status in the international pecking order.

China had to look the fact in the face, that she had no friends. Here was Russia menacing her to the north. Germany had invaded her territory at Swatow (Shantou). Japan had taken the Loo-Choo (Ryukyu) Islands. England held Hong Kong, and was forcing upon her a traffic in opium that meant the misery and ruin of her people. France was sending an expedition to dismember her empire. The United States had passed an act excluding Chinese from her soil, Chinese, alone of all races in the world.<sup>186</sup>

Young's predecessor, George F. Seward, also lamented what seemed to be a fading opportunity for a closer relationship between the United States and China. With the adoption of the exclusion policy and no real fruit from American intermediary efforts, Seward sensed that the days of China perceiving the United States to be a friendly power were numbered. Young quoted Seward's ominous opinion in a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Frederic Frelinghuysen (1817-1885) in December 1884:

The Chinese in earlier days sought our counsel in all serious matters. It is not too much to say that our advice was given in the interest of peace and progress, fairly to them and fairly so far as all others were concerned...Our anti-Chinese treaty and legislation, unfairly procured and unfairly made, have destroyed the old faith which the Chinese reposed in us and have left us unable, as between the foreign powers, to sustain the old position which

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<sup>185</sup> Young, *Men and Memories*, 304.

<sup>186</sup> Young to Frelinghuysen, August 8, 1883, in Jules Davids, ed., *American Diplomatic and Public Papers: The United States and China, the United States, China, and Imperial Rivalries, 1861-1893, The French-China War*, vol. 1 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1979) 32-33.

was essentially that of a friendly arbitrator of differences...It should have been our mission – and in the better days it appeared to be our mission – to sustain and support (China) in their efforts to work out their proper destiny.”<sup>187</sup>

The enactment of the exclusionary laws was yet another snag in the complex diplomatic relationship between the United States and China in the 19th century. The laws, along with the unequal treaties enjoyed by Americans in China at the time, reveal the inequalities favoring the United States in Sino-U.S. relations at the time. But there were some Americans – Burlingame, Pethick, Young, and perhaps even Grant – who gave China hope for a more equitable diplomatic partnership. Thus, to Li Hongzhang and his fellow Qing leaders, Grant’s arrival in East Asia in 1879 seemed like a good omen. Faced with the prospect of losing its longtime faithful tributary to Japan, China hoped the former U.S. leader would be a sympathetic mediator in the dispute. Grant was perhaps more impartial than China had hoped, but his involvement did pressure Japan to meet with China over the status of the islands. In the end, the negotiations were unsuccessful, but the situation reveals how Chinese leaders perceived the United States as a friendlier Western power and potential ally at the time.

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<sup>187</sup> “Young to Frelinghuysen,” December 26, 1884, ADP: ARC-I, 275.

## Abbreviations

Below is a list of works referred to by abbreviations in the thesis and bibliography.

ADP: ARC-I Davids, Jules, ed. *American Diplomatic and Public Papers: The United States and China*. Vol. 1 American Relations with China. Series II, The United States, China, and Imperial Rivalries, 1861-1893. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1979.

ADP: SJ-II Davids, Jules, ed. *American Diplomatic and Public Papers: The United States and China*. Vol. 8 Sino-Japanese Relations II. Series II, The United States, China, and Imperial Rivalries, 1861-1893. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1979.

CRW Teng, Ssu-yu, and John K. Fairbank. *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923*. New York: Atheneum, 1970.

Grant Papers Multiple volumes of *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* were consulted for this thesis. Below is the complete bibliographic information of each. Within the bibliography and paper, the papers are referred to as such: Grant Papers vol. number: page number (i.e. Grant Papers 29:164).

Grant, Ulysses S. *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*. Edited by John Y. Simon. Vol. 21: November 1, 1870-May 31, 1871. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998.

Grant, Ulysses S. *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*. Edited by John Y. Simon. Vol. 24: 1873. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000.

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Grant, Ulysses S. *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*. Edited by John Y. Simon. Vol. 29: October 1, 1878-September 30, 1880. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.

Grant, Ulysses S. *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*. Edited by John Y. Simon. Vol. 30: October 1, 1880-December 31, 1882. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.

PLHG Li Hongzhang 李鴻章. *Li Wenzhong gong quanji: Pengliao han'gao* 李文忠公全集: 朋僚函稿 (Complete works of Li Wenzhong [Li Hongzhang]:

Correspondence with friends). Compiled by Wu Rulun 吳汝綸. Reprint. Vol. 4. Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1962.

YSHG      Li Hongzhang 李鴻章. *Li Wenzhong gong quanji: Yishu han'gao* 李文忠公全集: 譯署函稿 (Complete works of Li Wenzhong [Li Hongzhang]: Letters to the foreign office). Compiled by Wu Rulun 吳汝綸. Reprint ed. Vol. 5. Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1962.

ZRXJ-GX    *Qing Guangxuchao Zhongri jiaoshe shiliao xuanji* 清光緒朝中日交涉史料選輯 (Selections of historical material related to Sino-Japanese negotiations during the Guangxu reign). Vol. 1. Taipei: Taiwan yinhang, 1965.

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## Appendix

### Timeline of Significant Events in Japan's Annexation of Ryukyu

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| 1372    | The Chuzan Kingdom becomes a tributary of the Ming Dynasty. Chuzan unites three kingdoms vying for power into the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1429.  |
| 1609    | Tokugawa Ieyasu approves Satsuma's expedition to Ryukyu. Ryukyu becomes a dually subordinate tributary to China and Japan.   |
| 1839-42 | The First Opium War results in British victory over China. Unequal treaties with Western powers (including the United States) are signed in the aftermath.   |
| 1850    | Beginning of the Taiping Rebellion in China. Li Hongzhang begins his rise to prominence as commander of the Huai Army.   |
| 1853    | U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry steams into Edo Harbor. Japan forced to sign unequal treaties with the Western powers in the following years.   |
| 1856-60 | Second Opium War results in another defeat for China, this time to a combined British and French force.  |
| 1861    | U.S. Civil War begins.   |
| 1864    | End of the Taiping Rebellion in China.   |
| 1865    | General Ulysses S. Grant accepts Confederate General Robert E. Lee's surrender at the Appomattox Court House. The U.S. Civil War ends.   |
| 1867    | End of the Tokugawa Period in Japan. The Meiji Restoration begins.   |
| 1868    | Anson Burlingame and members of the Qing Dynasty's first foreign mission arrive in Washington D.C. The Burlingame-Seward Treaty is signed, granting free migration of Chinese to the United States.  |
| 1869    | Ulysses S. Grant takes office as the 18th President of the United States.  |
| 1871    | The Formosa Incident results in the death of 54 Ryukyuan sailors at the hands of the Paiwan tribe in Taiwan.<br><br>Li Hongzhang, now governor-general of Zhili Province in China, negotiates the Sino-Japanese Friendship and Trade Treaty with Japan. The treaty does not give Japan most-favored nation status. |
| 1872    | Japan declares Ryukyu to be a <i>han</i> (domain or feudal territory) under the control of the Japanese government.  |



- 1874 Japan dispatches a military force to Taiwan to punish the Paiwan tribe for the deaths of the Ryukyuan sailors. The diplomatic crisis ends with the Peking Agreement between China and Japan in 1874. The treaty's wording implies that the Ryukyuan sailors were Japanese citizens.
- 1875 Japan orders Ryukyu to cease sending tribute to China. A Japanese garrison force is stationed in Ryukyu.
- 1877 Ryukyu informs China that its tribute mission was blocked by Japan.
- 1878 Chinese envoy to Japan He Ruzhang sends an offensive letter to Japanese officials regarding the Ryukyu situation. Japan refuses to discuss the issue.
- 1879 March: Japan declares the end of the Ryukyu Kingdom and the beginning of Okinawa Prefecture.  
 May: Ulysses S. Grant arrives in China.  
 June: Grant meets with Prince Gong in Beijing and Li Hongzhang in Tianjin and agrees to mediate the dispute between China and Japan. Grant arrives in Nagasaki, Japan on June 21.  
 July: Grant meets with Japanese officials in Nikko to discuss the Ryukyu issue.  
 August: Grant meets with the Meiji Emperor and mentions the Ryukyu issue. He later writes a letter to Li Hongzhang, Prince Gong, and Japanese official Iwakura Tomomi, advising that the two countries appoint commissioners to meet and negotiate a solution.  
 September: Grant returns to the United States.
- 1880 From August to October, Chinese and Japanese officials meet in Beijing to negotiate a solution to the Ryukyu dispute. After the two sides agree on a draft treaty, more powerful Chinese officials, including Zhang Zhidong and Li Hongzhang, strongly advise that China not sign the treaty. Negotiations break off.
- At almost the same time, U.S. diplomat James Angell negotiates the Angell Treaty with China, amending the Burlingame-Seward Treaty and allowing the U.S. to "regulate, limit, or suspend...but not absolutely prohibit" the migration of Chinese workers.
- 1882 The Chinese Exclusion Act is signed into law in the United States. Chinese migration to America comes to a halt.
- 1894-1895 The First Sino-Japanese War results in a humiliating defeat for China at the hands of Japan. China loses Ryukyu (officially), Taiwan, the Pescadores, and Korea.