

Document 7.2: Excerpts from “Li Hongzhang Negotiates with Japan,” 1895

FIRST INTERVIEW

MARCH 20, 1895

As the war between China and Japan came to a close, the Japanese were the clear victors. The Qing government sent Li Hongzhang of China to negotiate with Ito Hirobumi of Japan. After Li was wounded by an attempted assassin, Japan lowered the demand, though the ultimate cost to China was still enormous. The Treaty of Shimonoseki, signed on April 17, 1895, gave Japan huge tracts of land in China and opened the country to further infiltration by both Japan and the West.

Li Hongzhang (1823–1901) was a major figure in China his entire adult life. He was involved in the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion (see Chapter 5) and then in the Self-Strengthening Movement (see Chapter 6). He helped develop an infrastructure through railways, shipping companies, and telegraph lines, and strengthened China’s defense by supporting the manufacture of weapons. (See “A Closer Look” at the end of Chapter 6 for more information about Li Hongzhang.)

H(IS). E(XCELLENCY) LI. Your Excellencies may be assured that if my Government had not been actuated by a sincere desire to restore peace, I would not have been sent here; and if I had not been of like mind I would not have come.

H.E. ITO. Yours is a heavy responsibility and the issue at stake—the termination of the present war and restoring cordial relations between our countries—is of paramount importance. As Your Excellency is wise and experienced we may hope that our negotiations will end happily in a Treaty of lasting peace alike beneficial to both countries.

H.E. LI. On the Asiatic continent China and Japan are close neighbors and the written language of the two nations is the same. Is it well that we should live at enmity? The

conclusion of our present differences in a lasting peace should be our great concern, for prolonging hostilities will but injure China without benefitting Japan. The European Powers which maintain vast armaments nevertheless take the greatest care not to provoke war. And we, representing the principal countries of the East, should follow this example of Europe. If your Excellency and myself thoroughly appreciate this we cannot but conclude that the last policy which should rule the Asiatic continent, is that we should establish an enduring peace in order to prevent the yellow race of Asia from succumbing to the white race of Europe.

H.E. ITO. I endorse Your Excellency's views with all my heart. While at Tianjin ten years ago I discussed with your Excellency upon [*sic*] reforms in China, but I deeply regret to see that nothing whatever has been done in this direction.

H.E. LI. I very much appreciated what Your Excellency said then, and have since admired your energy in carrying out reforms in Japan; China, however, is hampered by antiquated customs which prevent desirable reforms. I remember Your Excellency advising that, in view of the vast area and population of China, administrative reforms should be effected gradually; yet, shame to say, ten years have wrought no changes—a proof of our incapacity; while Japan has organized an efficient army after Western models and is constantly perfecting the organization of her government.

When in Beijing before starting on this mission I talked over these matters with our Ministers of State, and some of them fully realized that China must reform if she would hold her own...

H.E. ITO. Your Government should appoint to its important offices men of the new school, possessed of Western knowledge, and of suitable age and vigor; You must put away what is obsolete in your system of Government if you would prosper.

H.E. LI. China is not without men in all stations who know the needs of the times; but the Empire is divided into so many provinces and jurisdictions—like Japan in feudal times—that this is a great obstacle to uniform and centralized Government...

SECOND INTERVIEW

MARCH 21, 1895

H.E. ITO. War is evil, though sometimes unavoidable.

H.E. LI. Far better avoided. When General Grant, Ex-President of the United States, visited Tianjin and we became friends, he said to me: “The loss of life in the Rebellion in my country was so terrible that after I became President I was always anxious to avert war and have ever since advised others to do so. Your Excellency won fame in suppressing the Taiping Rebellion, yet I urge you to be aware of entrance to a quarrel which might lead to war.” I have always tried to follow this excellent advice; Your Excellency well knows that I was opposed to this war.

H.E. ITO. War is a cruel and bloody business; yet there are times and conditions in the intercourse of States when there is no help for it.

H.E. LI. It is barbarious, and the perfection of modern weapons adds to the slaughter. I am too old to relish such things. Your Excellency is in the prime of life and feels the impulse of martial ardor.

H.E. ITO. How easily peace might have been made at the beginning!

H.E. LI. I was for peace then, but the opposition was too much for me and the opportunity was lost.

H.E. ITO. A very little yielding would have sufficed then, what a pity it was refused! We were like travelers a few miles apart; now we are separated by hundreds of miles and it is hard to turn back.

H.E. LI. Yet it must be done. It is easy for you as Premier.

H.E. ITO. Hundreds of miles apart and all to be retraced!

H.E. LI. Then why not halt now? Though you should go thousands of miles further surely you cannot expect to exterminate my nation!

H.E. ITO. We have never had such an intention. War aims at the destruction of the enemy's power—his fleets, armies, forts, and war material, and so to render him helpless; it is not waged against peaceable people.

H.E. LI. As we are willing to make peace we should stop the war.

H.E. ITO. The Chinese population of Jinzhou and other places occupied by Japanese forces are more tractable than Koreans and are hard workers; Chinese are very easy to govern.

H.E. LI. The Koreans were always an indolent people.

H.E. ITO. We can't get them to work for us. We are about to attack Formosa¹; what are the people there like?

H.E. LI. They are emigrants from Swatow and Zhangquan (?) on the mainland—(they are) bold and hardy.

H.E. ITO. There are aborigines too.

¹ Formosa is the name the Portuguese gave to the island now known as Taiwan.

H.E. LI. Yes, six-tenths are savages, the rest colonists. Your Excellency said that Japan will attack Formosa. This explains your objection to the Armistice. England will hardly approve of this move. You have furnished a case to point the moral of my argument about prejudice to the interests of other countries.

H.E. ITO. England will observe neutrality.

H.E. LI. But if not?

H.E. ITO. China is affected—not necessarily England.

H.E. LI. Hardly that, for you will be near the British colony of Hongkong.

H.E. ITO. The war is confined to our countries, no others will suffer.

H.E. LI. It is said that England is adverse to another Power taking Formosa.

H.E. ITO. If China should present Formosa to another Power the gift would be received with thanks.

H.E. LI. Formosa has been made a province of China and cannot be ceded away....

FIFTH AND LAST INTERVIEW

APRIL 15, 1895

H.E. LI. Last year the officials at Beijing denounced and impeached me as being friendly with Count Ito, Prime Minister of Japan; and now that I am here negotiating a Treaty with you their suspicions of friendliness will be confirmed.

H.E. ITO. Not understanding the situation they misjudged you; but now their eyes must be opened and they will regret their rashness.

H.E. LI. And if I sign this gruesome Treaty I am certain to bring down another avalanche of curses on my head. Think of it!... The Chinese in Formosa [Taiwan] are unwilling to remove and are equally unwilling to sell their property. If hereafter Proclamations are issued requiring them to do so and they revolt, the Chinese Government cannot be held responsible.

H.E. ITO. My Government will assume all future responsibility.

H.E. LI. I have received a telegram from the Governor of [Taiwan] stating that the Formosans have revolted and swear that they will not be subject to Japan.

H.E. ITO. Let them revolt. We can manage that.

H.E. LI. This is not said to alarm you. I am telling you the truth out of good-will.

H.E. ITO. I have heard of it.

H.E. LI. If the [Taiwanese] kill the officials and band together to resist, you must not blame me.

H.E. ITO. Let China transfer the sovereignty to us and the whole responsibility will be assumed by the Japanese Government... Our intention is to send troops and officials to take [Taiwan] over within a few weeks after the Treaty has been ratified.

H.E. LI. Someone can be appointed to consult with the Governor of [Taiwan] about all matters pertaining to the transfer.

H.E. ITO. As soon as ratifications have been exchanged the Chinese officials should proclaim the transfer to the [Taiwanese] and we will send troops and officers to take charge, for the time, of all war material.

H.E. LI. Will you also send Civil officers?

H.E. ITO. Yes.

H.E. LI. The transfer is a highly important matter, and the rules should be made first to prevent confusion.

H.E. ITO. We cannot wait six months. As soon as ratifications are exchanged we will send our people there...

H.E. LI. One month is rushing the matter. The Zongli Yamen² and myself are too far removed from [Taiwan] to know the actual situation there. It would be much better for China to delegate the Governor of [Taiwan] to arrange with the Japanese Governor on the spot what the conditions of transfer shall be. Then, the Treaty having been exchanged, we shall be on friendly terms and arrangements can readily be made.

H.E. ITO. One month is sufficient.

H.E. LI. There are many things to consider. Two months would give us more time to arrange the mutual advantage. Why such headlong haste about [Taiwan]? The plum is already in your mouth.

H.E. ITO. But we shall hunger for it until we have bolted it down.

² Chinese entity that managed foreign affairs

H.E. LI. One would think the 200 millions enough to satisfy your cravings. After exchange of ratifications it will be necessary to ask for an Imperial Decree appointing an official. One month is too brief.

H.E. ITO. We can make it “within a month an official shall be appointed by Edict, etc.”

H.E. LI. Do not mention the Edict.

H.E. ITO. Can you appoint an official within a month or not?

H.E. LI. Yes, but the arrangements for the transfer ought to be made by the Governor of [Taiwan].

H.E. ITO. We should specify that within two months the transfer shall be wholly accomplished.

Source: Reprinted in Cheng, Pei-kai, Michael Lestz, and Jonathan Spence, ed. *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999. 173–74.

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