



Struggle and Transformation in China

By Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

China's already diverse culture, traditions, and beliefs had been around an awfully long time before the things we call "modern" appeared there. Here's how that went down.

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Background

In the late 1600s, the Ming dynasty in China was falling apart. Rulers disagreed on many things. It led one group of Ming generals to gather allies from Manchuria, northeast of China. The area was known for its strong military. These Manchu units became the most powerful force within China. They established control over the area and created the Qing dynasty. It would rule China for over 250 years. The Qing emperors expanded the borders of China. They controlled an area that included many different cultures. By the 1800s, they ruled about 410 million people. However, it was a divided nation. Tensions existed between the Manchu Qing and the ethnic Han Chinese. Also, some people believed in following China's older traditions. They clashed with those who wished to make the empire modern. Soon, such anger led the Han to treat the Qing (Manchus) as if they were a foreign dynasty. These tensions produced several conflicts and rebellions. They would lead to the end of dynastic rule in China.

In the late 1700s, the Qing empire was peaking. It had much land and wealth. It was ruled in these years by emperor Qian Long (Ch'ien Lung). During this time, the British king, George III, wanted to open up more trade ports. So he sent the messenger Lord Macartney on a mission to China to get the project going. The emperor gave a bitter response to George III. He refused to open more ports. Qian Long said the holy empire "lacks no product within its borders." It did not need to bring in the manufacturers of "outside barbarians."



British ambassador, Lord Macartney, meeting the Qing Emperor, Qian Long, 1793. Public domain.

Emperor Qian Long bragged about China's strength. However, China's last dynasty would experience real trouble. Soon came the Opium Wars (1839-1860 CE). After came the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864 CE), and the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901 CE).

Western imperialism and internal struggle

Modern Communist Chinese scholars say the Qing era began with agreeing to “unequal treaties” with the British. These scholars argue that the Qing’s unlawful rule of China brought many disasters. There were foreign influences, natural disasters, hunger, and poor management. They also faced embarrassing defeats. There were peasant rebellions and fights with foreign “barbarians” such as the British and Japanese. Divisions based on ethnicity, religion, and ranking in society tore China apart. It would become powerless to foreign invaders. Their argument focuses on the internal problems that allowed foreign influence. Western historians thought differently about this period. They saw it as one where foreign influence succeeded in China. It led to the modernization of the nation. In truth, it was a mixture of both internal and external issues that led to this period of struggle and transformation.



[“Canton from the Heights”](#), 1841. By Edward H. Cree, public domain.

External meddling led to the Opium Wars. This was a war between the British and the Chinese. The British wanted the Chinese open more ports to their ships. However, the Chinese only wanted silver from Europe. Meanwhile, Europeans wanted many Chinese products. This meant the Chinese profited from the silver trade. But, European countries did not. Finally, the British found that many Chinese could no longer do without opium. It was used as medicine. It is also highly addictive. Most opium was grown in northern India. This area was under British rule in the 1760s. Eventually, British traders convinced Chinese merchants to trade tea for opium. Buying more opium and less silver did not help Chinese businesses and jobs. China’s paper money depended on silver for its worth.¹ In response, the Qing emperor ordered the trade of opium to end. Chinese officials dumped British opium into the Pearl River near Canton. The British responded with modern, steam-powered warships. The Chinese lost to the superior arms of the British. The treaty that ended the Opium Wars was crushing for the Qing. It lost Hong Kong for over 100 years and a lot of money. They were also forced to open up more ports for British ships. British citizens no longer had to follow Chinese laws. This explains the “unequal” bit of the treaties mentioned earlier.

¹ Silver was used to back up or support the paper currency produced in China. As a result, paper currency was tied directly to silver and represented a fixed amount of silver. This is similar to the gold standard that was used in most countries prior to the Great Depression.

But around the Opium Wars, the Qing emperors were dealing with an internal conflict. It was known as the Taiping Rebellion. It started with a rural teacher named Hong Xiuquan. He gathered an army of over 100,000 angry Chinese people. The rebels were mainly peasants. They suffered land shortages, mistakes by Manchu landlords, and lost money due to growing European control over trade. Hong Xiuquan blended Christian beliefs with ideas from Confucius, the Chinese philosopher. He promised salvation and a better life for all who followed him. It also outlawed opium. The uprising showcased the deep divisions in China.

The Taiping Rebellion was mainly a Chinese civil war. However European and American powers were involved. American soldiers were hired as mercenaries, or military for hire. They would fight for the Qing against the Taiping. Some did fight for the Taiping too. The British and French military also joined. However, these soldiers were “on loan” from their governments rather than loyal to the Qing. Additionally, the British and French weren’t really fighting because they thought the Qing were “right.” They just wanted to protect the trade treaties they had recently negotiated with the emperor. Later, the rebellion was stopped. However, almost 20 million were killed. The tensions between these communities within China and with foreign governments continued for many years.

Other political and environmental issues troubled China during this period. Governing was difficult. The Europeans were forcing themselves in. The Manchu rulers made many mistakes. Soon natural disasters such as floods came. Food shortages resulted. Many people were hungry and angry. That made the tension between China’s various groups even worse. China was changing quickly in some ways. So was the rest of the world. But most Chinese people held onto traditional views and values.

An era of conflicts: Modernization vs. traditional Chinese customs

China lost the Opium Wars to a modernized British military. After, modernization seemed more important than ever. More Western influences flooded into coastal cities. Railroads, a Western technology, were constructed. The military got more modern weapons. At first, the Chinese tried to balance out this outside influence. They celebrated traditional Chinese practices, such as the writings of Confucius. The period from 1860 to 1874 was known as the Tongzhi Restoration. It led to strengthened traditional Chinese values with some modernizations.

It began with the Empress Dowager Cixi (Tz’u-hsi). She was regent (advisor) and mother to the young Qing emperor, Tongzhi. Cixi ruled China for almost 50 years and held enormous power. Historians have often treated her negatively. They called her a cruel woman who couldn’t read. However, the truth was not that simple. She did use methods that would seem extreme today. But she also helped lead China during a tough time and brought positive changes.

Cixi’s later years were marked by conflicting goals: Should China become modern? Or should she unite the empire through traditional Chinese customs? China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War would lead to the Hundred Days’ Reform (Wuxu Reform). This bold effort aimed to modernize China through several changes. Many of these focused on “Westernization.” That meant taking on European-style laws and practices.

However, some Chinese wanted to modernize without becoming overly westernized. The proposed reforms angered traditionalists, including the Dowager Empress. Cixi had been in a semi-retirement from 1889. Still, she exercised control over the court. She also had control over Guangxu Emperor, Cixi’s nephew, and next-in-line to the emperor Tongzhi. In 1898 the reform movement launched. Cixi came out of retirement to launch a coup (revolt) against the emperor. She was successful in re-establishing her control. However, the coup simply encouraged other groups to find a way to force out the Qing family for good.



The Empress Dowager Cixi pictured with the wives of foreign (American) diplomats, 1903. By Unknown, public domain.

There would be one last attempt to deal with outside influence in China. The Qing supported a rebellion. It was led by members of a society in the provinces known as the Boxers (Yihequan).² This secret group had once been against the Qing. They still saw the Qing as a foreign government. But the Qing were able to recruit the Boxers to get rid of people they all agreed were foreigners—the Europeans.

Their first target was the community of Christians in northern China. Then in 1900, the Boxers moved to Beijing. There they fought back a group of foreign forces outside the city. Foreigners started getting attacked in the capital. Soon an international force of 20,000 troops marched into the city to free those being held. Guangxu, the Dowager Empress, and her court had to flee. Negotiations took place between the Empress' emissaries (representatives) and the foreign alliance. After, the Empress returned to Beijing. She began to carry out many of the changes that were suggested in the Hundred Days' Reform movement.

In 1908 both the Emperor Guangxu and the Empress Dowager died in the same week. One final emperor would rule China until he was forced to step down in 1912. Soon, the Xinhai Revolution (Chinese Revolution) led to the creation of a republic. The 2000-year rule of emperors in China had officially come to an end.

² The English translation of Yihequan is "righteous and harmonious fists", which is why westerners referred to this group as the "Boxers" ("Boxer Rebellion").

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