



# 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.

## 1060L

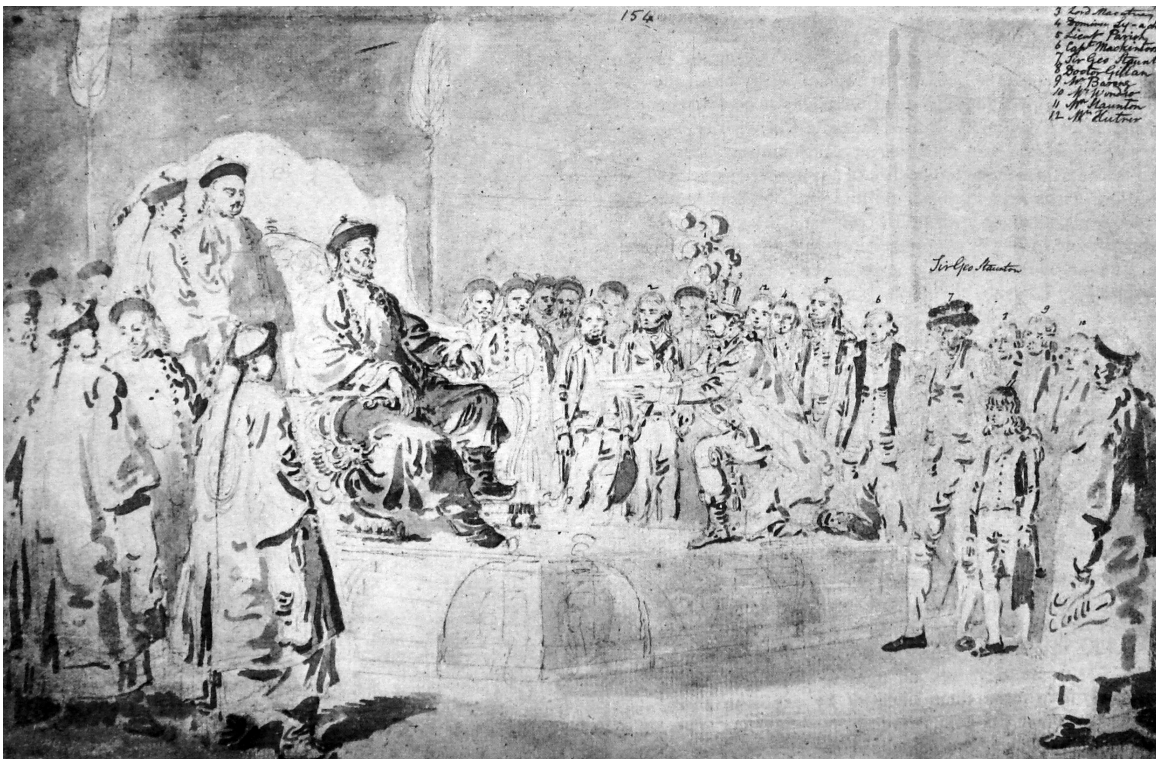


## Background

In the late seventeenth century, the Ming dynasty in China was in disorder. Internal disagreements led one group of Ming generals to recruit allies from a militarized society in Manchuria, northeast of China. Once they were allowed in, these Manchu units became the most powerful force within China. They established control over the area and created the Qing dynasty that ruled China for over 250 years. The Qing emperors expanded the borders of China and controlled an area that included many different ethnicities and cultures. While the Qing reigned over about 410 million people by the nineteenth century, it was also a divided nation. Tensions existed between the Manchu Qing and the ethnic Han Chinese. Also, traditionalists were at odds with those who wished to modernize the empire. These divisions caused such resentment that the Han started treating the Qing (Manchus) as if they were a foreign dynasty. These tensions produced several conflicts and rebellions that would lead to the end of dynastic rule in China.

In the late eighteenth century, the Qing empire was peaking both in terms of geographic area and prosperity. Emperor Qian Long (Ch'ien Lung) ruled during these years. At the same time, the British king, George III, wanted to open up more trade ports. So he sent the ambassador Lord Macartney on a mission to China to get the project going. The emperor, upon meeting this large group of foreigners, had a bitter response for George III. He refused to open more ports, saying:

*"Our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its borders. There was therefore no need to import the manufacturers of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce..."*



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

Emperor Qian Long tried to assert China's strength. However, China's last dynasty would experience real peril with the Opium Wars (1839-1860 CE), the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864 CE), and the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901 CE).

## Western imperialism and internal struggle

China during the late Qing dynasty faced many problems. Modern Communist Chinese scholars present this era as one that began with the foreign dynasty agreeing to the “unequal treaties” demanded by the British. These scholars argue that the Qing’s unlawful rule of China brought one disaster after another. The disasters included foreign influence, famine, natural disasters, and poor management. They faced humiliating defeats against both peasant rebellions and foreign “barbarians” such as the British and Japanese. In addition, divisions based on ethnicity, religion, and social class left China torn apart, and vulnerable to foreign intrusions. Their argument focuses on the internal problems that allowed western powers to interfere in China’s affairs. By contrast, western historians traditionally viewed this period 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, two periods of war fought between the British and Chinese. The British wanted the Chinese to open more ports to their ships. However, the Chinese only wanted one thing from Europe—silver, mostly from mines in the Americas. Meanwhile, Europeans wanted many Chinese products, such as tea, silk, and ceramics. Economically, this meant the Chinese profited from the silver trade while European countries did not. Finally, the British found something that many Chinese could no longer do without—opium. Used as medicine, but also highly addictive, most of this opium was grown in northern India, which was under British control by the 1760s. Eventually, British traders convinced Chinese merchants to accept opium in exchange for products like tea. Buying more opium and less silver did not help the Chinese economy. China’s paper currency relied on silver for its worth.<sup>1</sup> In response, the Qing emperor ordered the end of the opium trade. Chinese officials dumped British opium into the Pearl River near Canton. The British responded with modern, steam-powered war ships, defeating the Chinese

<sup>1</sup> 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.

arms. The treaty that ended the Opium Wars was devastating for the Qing, who lost Hong Kong for over a century and much money. They were also required to open up more ports for British ships. British citizens no longer had to follow Chinese laws, hence the “unequal” bit of the treaties mentioned earlier.

But around the same period as the Opium Wars, the Qing emperors were dealing with an internal conflict known as the Taiping Rebellion. A rural teacher named Hong Xiuquan was able to mobilize an army of over 100,000 dissatisfied Chinese people. The uprising showcased the deep divisions in China. The rebels were mainly peasants who were suffering land shortages, mismanagement by Manchu landlords, and the economic losses of growing European control over trade. Hong Xiuquan blended beliefs from the Christian religion with ideas from Chinese philosopher Confucius, creating a movement. He promised salvation and a better life for all who followed him. His proposal would forbid the mixing of unmarried men and women. It also outlawed opium, a drug that ripped apart families and communities.

While the Taiping Rebellion was mainly a Chinese civil war, European and American powers were involved. American soldiers were hired as mercenaries (military for hire) to fight for the Qing against the Taiping, although some also fought for the Taiping. The British and French military also participated but these soldiers were “on loan” from their respective governments rather than loyal to the Qing. In addition, the British and French weren’t really fighting because they thought the Qing were “right.” Instead, they wanted to protect the trade treaties they had recently negotiated with the emperor. Eventually, the rebellion was stopped, but 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 gave China many headaches during this period. European meddling and Manchu misrule made governing more difficult. Added to these problems were a series of natural disasters that led to famines. Many people were hungry and angry, which worsened the tension between China’s various groups. Communities in China were also changing. Coastal areas endured the mass arrival of European missionaries and merchants. Meanwhile, the interior areas faced increased friction between rival ethnicities and beliefs. China was changing rapidly in some ways, just like the rest of the world. But most Chinese people held onto traditional views and values, varied though they were.

## An era of conflicts: Modernization vs. traditional Chinese customs

China lost the Opium Wars to a modernized British military. After this, modernization seemed more important than ever. More Western influences flooded into coastal cities. Railway lines, a Western technology, were constructed. The military acquired more advanced weapons. At first, the Chinese attempted to balance out this outside influence with traditional Chinese practices, such as a reliance on Confucian ideals. The period from 1860 to 1874, known as the Tongzhi Restoration, led to a strengthening of traditional Chinese values with some modernizations.

This 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 exercised enormous power. Historians, both at the time, and later on, would paint her in an unflattering light, as a ruthless, illiterate woman. However, the truth was not that simple. While she used strategies that would seem extreme by today’s standards, she helped lead China during an era that also led to positive reforms.

The later years of Cixi’s influence were marked by conflicting goals: modernization versus uniting the empire through traditional Chinese customs and values. China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War would lead to the Hundred Days’ Reform (Wuxu Reform). This ambitious effort sought to modernize China through a series of reforms. Many of these focused on “Westernization,” meaning the adoption of European-style laws and practices.



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

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 and the Guangxu Emperor, Cixi's nephew and successor to the emperor Tongzhi. In 1898 as the reform movement launched, Cixi came out of retirement to launch a coup (revolt) against the emperor. While successful in re-establishing her control, the coup simply encouraged other groups to find a way to force out the Qing family for good.

In one last attempt to deal with foreign influence in China, the Qing supported a rebellion led by members of a society in the provinces known as the Boxers (Yihequan).<sup>2</sup> This secret group had once been against the Qing. They wanted to overthrow what they still saw as a foreign government. But the Qing were able to recruit them to get rid of the 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 where they repelled a group of foreign forces outside the city. Attacks on foreigners started happening in the capital. Soon an international force of almost 20,000 troops marched into the city to free those under siege. Guangxu, the Dowager Empress, and her court were forced to flee. After negotiations between the Empress' emissaries (representatives) and the foreign alliance, the Empress returned to Beijing. She began to carry out many of the reforms 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 after a rebellion that began the previous year. The Xinhai Revolution (Chinese Revolution) resulted in the formation of a republic. The 2000-year reign of emperors in China had officially come to an end.

<sup>2</sup> 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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Bridgette Byrd O'Connor holds a DPhil in history from the University of Oxford and has taught Big History, World History, and AP U.S. Government and Politics for the past ten years at the high school level. In addition, she has been a freelance writer and editor for the Big History Project and the Crash Course World History and U.S. History curriculums.

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