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 seventeenth century, the Ming dynasty in China was in disorder. Internal disagreement led one group of Ming generals to gather 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. It would rule China for over 250 years. The Qing emperors expanded the borders of China and controlled an area that included many different ethnic groups and cultures. The Qing reigned over about 410 million people by the 1800s. Still, 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 eighteenth century, the Qing empire was peaking both in terms of total land and wealth. Emperor Qian Long (Ch’ien Lung) was the ruler then. During this time, the British king, George III, wanted to open up more trade ports. So, he sent the ambassador Lord Macartney to China to get the project going. After meeting the foreign group, the emperor 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…”

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), the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864 CE), and the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901 CE).
Western imperialism and internal struggle

Modern Communist Chinese scholars present the Qing 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. There were foreign influences, natural disasters, famine, and poor management. They also faced embarrassing defeats against both peasant rebellions and foreign “barbarians,” such as the British and Japanese. In addition, divisions based on ethnicity, religion and ranking in society left China torn apart. It would become vulnerable to foreign intrusions. Their argument focuses on the internal problems that allowed western powers to interfere in China. 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.

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. 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, by the 1760s under British rule. 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. 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

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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.
British. 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. This explains 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 gather an army of over 100,000 angry Chinese people. The uprising showcased the deep divisions in China. The rebels were mainly peasants. They suffered land shortages, mismanagement by Manchu landlords, and lost money due to growing European control over trade. Hong Xiuquan blended beliefs from the religion Christianity and the Chinese philosopher Confucius, creating a movement. He promised salvation and a better life for all who followed him. His ideas would outlaw 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 governments rather than loyal to the Qing. Additionally, 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. 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. European meddling and Manchu rulers’ mistakes made governing more difficult. Added to this problem were a series of natural disasters that led to food shortages. Many people were hungry and angry. That worsened the tension between China’s various groups. China was changing rapidly in some ways, just like 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 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 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 treated her negatively, then and later. They called her a ruthless woman who couldn’t read. However, the truth was not that simple. She did use methods that would seem extreme by today’s standards. But she also helped lead China during an era that led to positive reforms.

The later years of Cixi’s influence were marked by conflicting goals: Should China become modern? Or should she unite 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 bold effort aimed to modernize China through several reforms. Many of these focused on “Westernization,” meaning the adoption of 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 and the Guangxu Emperor, Cixi’s nephew, and next-in-line to the emperor Tongzhi. In 1898, with the reform movement launching, Cixi came out of retirement to begin a coup (revolt) against the emperor. While successful in re-establishing her control, the coup simply encouraged other groups 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). This secret group had once been against the Qing, seeing them 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. There they fought back 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 being held. 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.

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


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