Struggle and Transformation in China

By Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

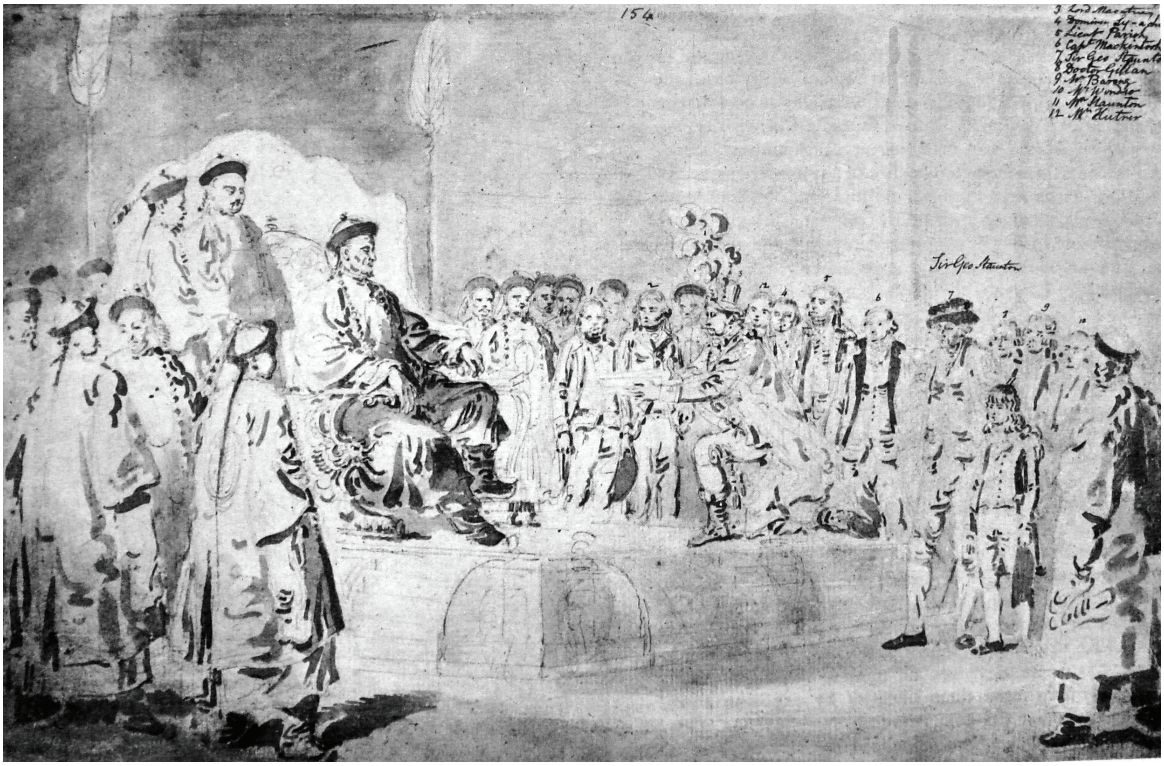
China's already diverse culture, traditions, and beliefs had been around an awfully long time before the things we call "modern" appeared there. Here's how that went down.

Background

In the late seventeenth century, the Ming dynasty in China was in disorder. Internal dissent 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 a number of different ethnicities and cultures. While the Qing reigned over a population of about 410 million 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 at its height both in terms of geographic area and prosperity. 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 ambassador Lord Macartney on a mission to China to get the project going. The emperor, upon meeting this large group of foreigners, didn't exactly throw a welcome parade. Here is his disdainful response to George III.

> *"Yesterday your Ambassador petitioned my Ministers to memorialise me regarding your trade with China, but his proposal is not consistent with our dynastic usage and cannot be entertained. Hitherto [Before], all European nations, including your own country's barbarian merchants, have carried on their trade with Our Celestial Empire at Canton. Such has been the procedure for many years, although 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…"*

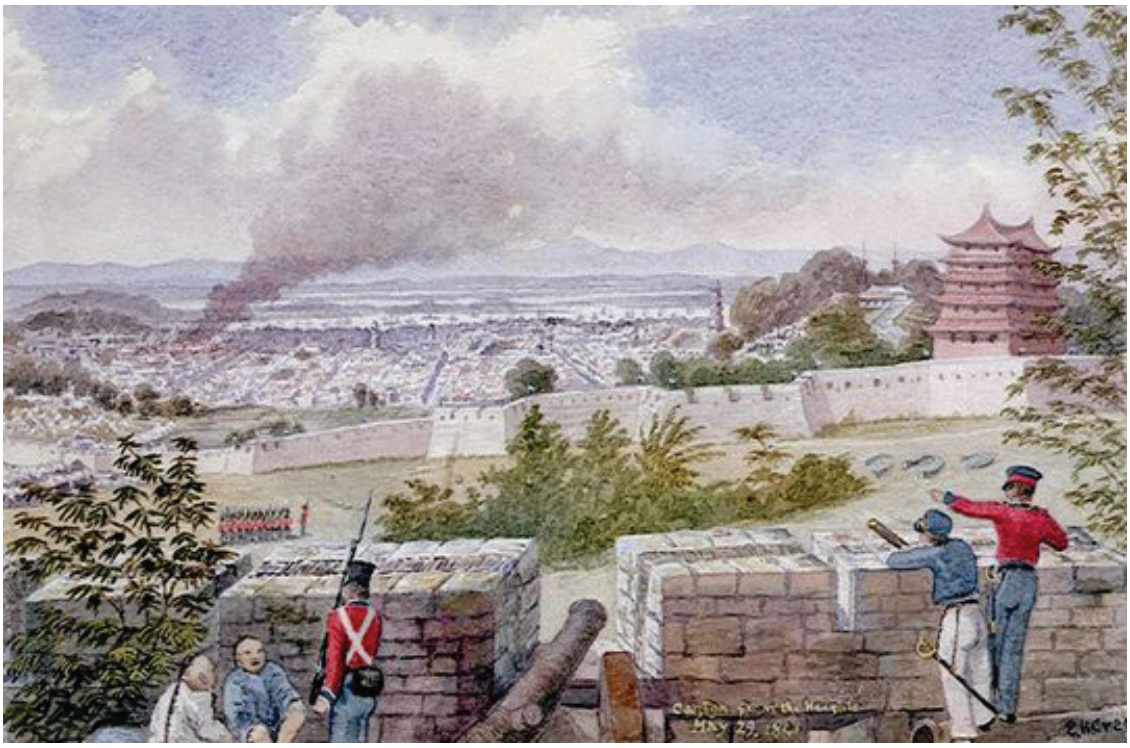


British ambassador, Lord Macartney, meeting the Qing Emperor, Qian Long, 1793. Public domain.

But despite the position of strength stated by the emperor Qian Long, 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, both at home and from the outside. Modern Communist Chinese scholars present this era as one that began with the foreign dynasty agreeing to the "unequal treaties" (described further below) demanded by the British. Their illegitimate rule of China brought one disaster after another, the scholars argue. These range from foreign influence to natural disasters, famine, poor management, and humiliating defeats against both peasant rebellions and foreign "barbarians" such as the British and Japanese. Divisions based on ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status left China in disunity, and vulnerable to foreign intrusions. By contrast, western historians traditionally viewed this period as one where foreign influence succeeded in China and led to modernization of the nation.



"Canton from the Heights", 1841. By Edward H. Cree, public domain.

The unequal treaties were one result of the Opium Wars, two periods of war fought between the British and Chinese. The British wanted to expand networks of trade by having the Chinese 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 products from China, 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, 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[1]). In response, the Qing emperor ordered the trade of

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.

opium to end. Chinese officials dumped British opium into the Pearl River near Canton. The British responded with modern, steam-powered war ships and the Chinese lost to the superior arms of the British. The treaty that ended the Opium Wars was devastating for the Qing, who lost Hong Kong (for over a century!) and lots of money. They were also required to open up more ports for British ships and 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 Confucian and Christian beliefs into a doctrine that promised salvation and a better life for all who followed him. His proposal would forbid the mixing of unmarried men and women. It would also outlaw 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 not before 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 intervention and Manchu misrule made governing more difficult, and a succession of natural disasters such as floods led to famines. Many people were hungry and angry (hangry), and that made the tension between China's various groups even worse. Communities in China were also changing. Coastal areas endured the mass influx of European missionaries and merchants, while the interior areas dealt with 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

After China lost to a modernized Japanese military in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895 CE), therefore losing control of the Korean peninsula, modernization seemed more important than ever. More Western influences flooded into coastal cities. Railway lines (a Western technology) were constructed and the military acquired more advanced weapons. At first the Chinese attempted to counterbalance 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), who 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 Empress Dowager Cixi pictured with the wives of foreign (American) diplomats, 1903. By Unknown, public domain.

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 which focused on "Westernization", meaning the adoption of European-style laws and practices.

However, some Chinese wanted to modernize without becoming overly westernized, so the plan angered traditionalists, including the Dowager Empress. Cixi had been in a semi-retirement from 1889 but still exercised influence and control over the Guangxu Emperor (Cixi's nephew and successor to the emperor Tongzhi) and the court. In 1898 with the launch of the reform movement, 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 get rid of 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[2]). This secret group had once been hostile to the Qing and 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. In 1900, the Boxers then moved to Beijing where they repelled a group of foreign forces outside the city. When attacks on foreigners started happening in the capital, 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

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

(representatives) and the foreign coalition, the Empress returned to Beijing and began to institute 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.

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