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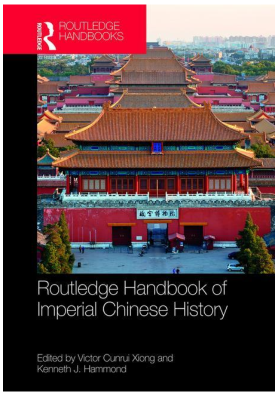

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Victor Cunrui Xiong, Kenneth J. Hammond

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Nancy Park

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THE QING DYNASTY (POST-1800)

Nancy Park

Qing maritime trade in the age of imperialism

For the first 40 years of Manchu rule, the rulers of the Qing dynasty prohibited coastal trade to decrease the likelihood of a seaborne attack by supporters of the vanquished Ming. In 1684, however, after having extinguished the last sparks of Ming loyalism, the Kangxi emperor (r. 1661–1772) authorized the opening of four cities in South China to direct maritime trade with Europe. For the next 75 years, trade was conducted freely at these ports. On the European side, trade was fueled by a voracious demand for Chinese tea, silks, and porcelain. On the Chinese side, population growth, wealth accumulation, and increasing specialization encouraged the steady expansion of maritime commerce. Although the government's formal policy remained anti-commercial, in keeping with the traditional Confucian ideology deprecating trade, the mid-Qing rulers were open to pursuing commercial relations with other countries as long as there was no threat to China's internal stability.

The Canton System, 1757–1842

The multiport trade system continued until 1757, when the Qianlong emperor (r. 1735–1796) placed greater controls on maritime trade in response to perceived political and economic threats from abroad. To limit Westerners' movements and influence in China, the emperor established a single-port commerce policy (*yikou tongshang* 一口通商) known as the Canton System, which restricted maritime trade to the southern coastal city of Canton (Guangzhou) in Guangdong province. Under the Canton System, European merchants were required to live in foreign enclaves known as "factories" (a derivation of "factor," a type of mercantile agent). The factories were located outside the city walls of Guangzhou and combined the functions of trading post, warehouse, and living quarters. From 1758 until the collapse of the Canton System in 1842, the factories were the only places that foreigners could legally live and work in China.

Within the restrictive and monopolistic framework of the Canton System, all maritime commerce was handled by a dozen or so officially licensed Chinese brokers (*hang* 行, Anglicized as "hong"). Collectively known as the Cohong (*gonghang* 公行), these officially authorized merchants were responsible for controlling all foreigners and their vessels, and had monopoly over all imports and exports – similar to the monopolistic rights that had been granted to the British East India Company and Dutch East India Company by their home governments. They had sole responsibility for buying and selling goods, negotiating prices, establishing tariffs, and controlling smuggling. They also supported militia and educational institutions, managed the factories, and acted as intermediaries between foreign merchants and the Qing government. During the heyday of the Canton System, the hong merchants wielded enormous influence, allowing some – most notably, Houqua (Wu Bingjian 伍秉鑑, 1769–1843), a leading hong merchant who was once one of the richest men in the world – to amass huge personal fortunes.

Taxes on foreign trade were paid to the Superintendent of Maritime Customs, better known to Westerners as the "Hoppo" (most likely a distortion of *Hubu* 戶部, the Chinese term for "Board of Revenue," which was the central government office in charge of state finances). The Hoppo was a representative of the Imperial Household Department (*neiwufu* 內務府), a Beijing-based agency whose primary role was to manage the internal finances and household affairs of the imperial family, but which also played an important role in Qing foreign relations. The Hoppo was responsible for controlling shipping, collecting tariffs, and maintaining order in Canton, as well as for ensuring that the profits from trade would not be handled through the normal bureaucratic channels, but would be sent directly to the Imperial Household Department – which also operated as the emperor's privy purse.

Problems with the Canton System

Although foreign merchants chafed at the restrictions on their movement and autonomy, the Canton trade was extremely lucrative for Chinese and European merchants alike. According to a number of Western traders, Canton was one of the best ports in the world in the 1820s and 1830s, offering relatively convenient access to Chinese goods at a single port of call, without having to travel to the interior. Moreover, the Cohong system offered such immense profits that European traders and their home governments were willing to accept its inconveniences and let well enough alone. However, as European demand for Chinese goods increased and the Industrial Revolution led them to seek more markets for their manufactures, the disadvantages of the one-port system became more apparent. Merchants began agitating for an expanded and freer system of trade, and felt that the Canton System, which emphasized containment of international commerce, was ill-equipped to provide it.

Contributing to European frustration with the status quo was the chronic trade imbalance with China. Before the 1800s, European demand for tea, silk, and chinoiserie (lacquer, porcelain, and other novelties) outpaced Chinese demand for European manufactures. Much of the imbalance can be attributed to rising exports of tea, which increased from 2.6 million pounds in 1761 to more than 23.3 million pounds by 1800. Lacking a product that the Chinese were willing to purchase in comparable amounts, foreign merchants paid for the balance of their imports with silver from continental Europe and Mexico. During the 1722–1723 season, silver made up at least 90 percent of the cargo en route to Canton. From the mid-seventeenth century, around 28 million kilograms of silver poured into China, principally from European powers, in exchange for Chinese goods.

By the late eighteenth century, British traders began lobbying their government to sponsor an embassy to China to promote their commercial and diplomatic interests. In 1793, King George III appointed Lord George Macartney, a colonial administrator and statesman, to lead a mission to China to negotiate greater access to the Chinese market and to request a permanent British embassy in Beijing. Although Macartney was granted an audience with the reigning Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–1796), the mission achieved none of its official objectives. Similar embassies were launched by the English peer Lord Napier in 1834, and by the Dutch in 1794 and the Russians in 1805, but these too ended in failure. When diplomacy proved unsuccessful, European governments began exploring other strategies to resolve their balance of payments deficit and to broaden their economic and political footprint in China.

The opium trade

Opium, a highly addictive narcotic that was small in bulk, but high in value, proved to be the solution to Europe's trade dilemma. A derivative of the poppy, opium had been used for medicinal purposes since the Tang dynasty (618–907). By the seventeenth century, Chinese from the coastal areas of Fujian and Guangdong had begun mixing it with tobacco and smoking it, and in the eighteenth century, it became popular to burn opium extract over a lamp and inhale the fumes through a pipe, a practice that continued well into the twentieth century. To meet the growing demand, the British invested in the cultivation of Indian opium for export to China. Opium soon became an integral part of the triangular British-Indian-Chinese trade network, in which Britain exported cotton manufactures to India and India exported raw cotton and opium to China in exchange for silver, which was later used to purchase Chinese tea and silk for the British market.

Opium exports to China steadily expanded during the nineteenth century, largely through the efforts of the British East India Company. However, since the Company was not allowed to participate directly in the opium trade, beginning in 1729, it began licensing private traders to smuggle opium into China. British merchant firms like Jardine, Matheson & Company, and its primary rivals Dent & Company and Russell & Company, emerged as key players in the "country trade," referring to the traffic in products between India and China by private traders. Other European countries and the United States soon joined the opium trade, forming their own agency houses and earning fortunes in the process. Over the next century, these companies expanded their coastal traffic, invested in new and faster clipper ships, and extended the traffic farther north and farther inland.

As early as 1787, opium provided over half the funds required for the purchase of tea. By 1804, the European trade deficit with China had turned into a surplus, with some seven million silver dollars flooding out of China to India, and from there to Britain, between 1806 and 1809. According to economic historian Lin Man-houng, the annual average of opium imports was 4,600 piculs (*dan*, approximately 133.3 pounds) in 1811–1820; 10,400 piculs in 1821–1830; 26,000 piculs in 1831–1840; 40,500 piculs in 1841–1850; and 68,000 piculs in 1851–1860. The opium traffic was so lucrative that Eliza Morrison, the widow of Robert Morrison, writing in 1839, claimed she knew of only *one* foreign trader in Canton who did not engage in the opium trade.

Gunboat diplomacy and self-strengthening

The reverse flow of silver and rising number of addicts caused alarm within the Qing court and bureaucracy, prompting a search for solutions to the opium problem. Between 1813 and 1815, concern over the worsening balance of trade led the Jiaqing emperor (r. 1796–1820) to prohibit further opium imports and to enact new regulations to punish users and suppliers of the drug. Despite these policies, the opium trade continued to expand, particularly after the 1830s when the British East India Company's monopoly ended, sparking increased competition and a rapid growth of the country trade. In 1838, the Daoguang emperor (r. 1820–1850) appointed Lin Zexu 林則徐, an official known for his scholarly brilliance and moral rectitude, to the post of Imperial Commissioner with the task of eradicating the opium trade. To help him suppress the opium traffic, Lin was granted plenipotentiary powers and supreme command of Canton's naval fleet.

Lin Zexu and the Opium War

The task of eradicating the opium trade was daunting because it not only involved dealing with foreign merchants, but also in fighting native vested interests, including sellers, buyers, and users of the drug as well as the officials charged with its interdiction. Lin's multipronged strategy to halt the illegal importation of opium into China included a direct appeal to the reigning British monarch Queen Victoria (1837–1901). In an open letter to the British monarch, which was later published in the *Times* of London, he urged her to halt the trade, writing: "There are barbarian ships that strive to come here for trade for the purpose of making a great profit…. By what right do they then in return use the poisonous drug to injure the Chinese people?"[1] There is no evidence that the queen received the letter, but even if she had it is questionable whether she would have taken action to stop the opium trade, which had brought wealth and prosperity to British merchants and the government.

Lin also cracked down on suppliers and users of the drug. In 1839, he arrested more than 1,700 Chinese opium dealers and confiscated some 70,000 opium pipes. He banned further sales of opium and demanded that foreign merchants hand over existing supplies of the drug to the Chinese government without compensation. When they refused, he closed the channel to Canton and held fifteen of the most notorious opium traffickers, including members of the Jardine, Matheson, and Dent families, under virtual siege in their factories. Lin then directed Chinese troops to board British ships anchored in international waters, outside Chinese jurisdiction, where their cargo was still legal, and destroy the opium stores. Over a 23-day period, more than 20,000 chests of opium, valued at 2.66 million pounds, were destroyed.

The British government, although not officially denying China's right to control imports of the drug, objected to the seizure and demanded compensation. The Chinese government refused, a decision that triggered the First Opium War (1839–1842). Open hostilities between China and Britain began in 1839. British gunboats, armed with the latest in firepower, inflicted a decisive defeat over the Qing navy, ravaging China's coastal defenses in a series of battles. This strategy, later referred to as "gunboat diplomacy," culminated with the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, the first of many "unequal treaties" through which European governments received major concessions from China while granting nothing in return.

The new treaty system

The Treaty of Nanjing ended the Canton System and ushered in an era of foreign intervention and domestic decline, popularly referred to by modern Chinese as the "Century of Humiliation." According to the terms of the treaty, Britain gained the right to establish a diplomatic presence in China and British subjects were granted extraterritorial privileges. Under the system of extraterritoriality, foreigners were not bound by local laws, but by the civil and criminal laws of their home country. In addition, China was forced to open five additional ports to foreign trade, cede the island of Hong Kong to Britain "in perpetuity," unilaterally fix Chinese tariffs at a low rate, and pay an indemnity of 21 million silver dollars to compensate for Britain's war losses. The Treaty of Nanjing was followed by similar agreements with the United States, France, and other nations, further undermining China's traditional mechanisms of foreign relations and trade.

The Qing government was again humiliated in the Arrow War (1856–1860), which began as a minor diplomatic disagreement and developed into a multi-year conflict pitting China against Britain, the United States, France, and Russia. The catalyst was an alleged insult to the British flag, purportedly perpetrated by Chinese officers during their seizure of a merchant vessel called the *Arrow* on suspicion of piracy. Because the vessel formerly had been registered in Hong Kong, Harry Parkes, the acting British consul in Canton, asserted that it was entitled to fly the British flag and claim British protection. The facts of the incident were disputed by the Chinese side; however, the British and their imperialist allies used the event as justification for the use of force in order to press for greater diplomatic and trade rights in China.

The Arrow War ended with defeat for China and the signing of the Treaty of Tianjin in 1858 (ratified by the Convention of Beijing in 1860), which resulted in the further opening of the country to Western diplomats, merchants, and Christian missionaries; the legalization of the opium trade; and the exaction of a crippling 16 million tael indemnity. These indignities culminated with the flight and subsequent death of the Xianfeng emperor (r. 1850–1861) and the destruction by British and French troops of the Yuanming Yuan 圓明園 (Garden of Perpetual Brightness), a complex of palaces and gardens on the outskirts of Beijing.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, European powers and the Empire of Japan – which China had traditionally considered to be a vassal state – continued their strategy of using gunboat diplomacy to gain political and economic advantages, which they enforced through a succession of unequal treaties. As a result of the treaty provisions, Christian missionaries were allowed to move freely and openly proselytize throughout the empire, increasing tensions between resident foreigners and the native population. The number of treaty ports continued to expand – by 1917 there were ninety-two of them – and some were placed under outright foreign administration. Making matters worse for China was the "most favored nation" clause, which guaranteed that any privilege given to one imperialist power would be shared automatically with the others, further undermining the government's authority.

Reform and reaction

The political unraveling of the Qing dynasty at the hands of the imperialist powers led to increased calls for change. Progressive reformers like the scholar-official Feng Guifen 馮桂芬 (1808–1874) advocated building upon a foundation (*ti* 體) of traditional Confucian values and institutions, but modifying them with Western techniques (*yong* 用) for achieving wealth and power. More conservative thinkers, such as the Mongol bannerman and statesman Woren 倭仁 (1804–1871), opposed the introduction of "Western methods," claiming that the goals of Western science and technology were incompatible with Chinese values and ideals. True to his Confucian training, Woren argued that the only way to raise the Qing Empire from its state of decline was to reject foreign techniques and learning and reaffirm the supremacy of China's traditional moral principles.

The accession of a new emperor in 1861 helped to determine the direction of the reform movement. After the death of the Xianfeng emperor (r. 1850–1861), his 5-year-old son, the Tongzhi Emperor (r. 1861–1875), ascended the throne. Following a brief struggle for power, Prince Gong (half-brother to the Xianfeng emperor and uncle to the Tongzhi emperor) was appointed co-regent, serving partnership with the two dowager empresses: Ci'an 慈安 (primary consort to the former emperor) and empress-mother Cixi 慈禧 (mother of the reigning emperor). As *de facto* head of state, Prince Gong launched a "Self-Strengthening" movement emphasizing diplomatic cooperation, industrial development, and military strength. To this end, in 1861, the government established the Zongli Yamen 總理衙門 (lit. “Office of General Management”), a new central government office in charge of foreign affairs.

The inauguration of the Zongli Yamen signaled a new era in Sino-foreign relations, with a greater emphasis on diplomatic cooperation and mutual understanding. The new office oversaw many of China’s self-strengthening efforts, including the sponsorship of foreign language schools and translation bureaus, as well as the promotion of Western learning, scientific knowledge, military modernization, and industrial development. The office also took the lead in sending Chinese students to foreign universities so that they could gain a broader understanding of the outside world. Upon their return, many of these students made significant contributions to China’s modernization efforts.

Another emphasis of the Self-Strengthening movement was improving China’s defense, which required a concurrent investment in military industry, training, and communications. Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811–1872), a highly respected statesman and military hero, established an ironworks in Shanghai that later became the Jiangnan Arsenal, a major manufacturer of armaments in the 1860s and 1870s. In developing the arsenal, he relied at first on machinery purchased from abroad and the advice of Western experts, who were employed to instruct Chinese in the manufacture and use of arms. The arsenal also had a translation bureau, which translated foreign works into Chinese.

Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823–1902), a military general who became one of China’s leading industrialists, founded the Tianjin Military Academy, staffed by German officers, which taught military tactics, science, foreign languages, and technical subjects. He also established arsenals in Nanjing and Tianjin, and created an industrial empire of railways, factories, and mines, many of which were run by Western experts. Zuo Zongtang 左宗棠 (1812–1885), a military leader who participated in the campaign against the Taipings, established a naval academy specializing in the teaching of foreign languages, navigation, and shipbuilding, and oversaw the construction of the Fuzhou Dockyard, which began operations using machines purchased from France.

For a time it appears that the reforms might be successful at halting the Qing decline. Foreign governments, including Britain, France, and the United States, favored a conciliatory policy toward the dynasty, believing that a peaceful, prosperous, and stable China was in their common interest. However, their enthusiasm faded as it became clear that the reformers were not looking to fundamentally change China’s political and economic institutions, but only wanted to borrow elements of Western science and technology to help strengthen the existing system. Moreover, as Mary Claybaugh Wright has discussed, many Westerners were looking for quick results, and when progress did not come about quickly enough, they became less supportive of China’s reform efforts.

However, the greatest obstacles to reform did not come from outside forces, but rose up within the Qing court. Even the gradual modernization program advocated by Prince Gong and his allies was opposed by conservatives within the court, who were suspicious of foreign influence and wary of change. Leading the conservative faction was the Empress Dowager Cixi, who had begun her palace life as a minor concubine to the Xianfeng emperor, but who had risen to prominence when her son acceded to the throne. For 14 years she served as co-regent for the emperor, and as her power and status grew, her support for Prince Gong and his reforms waned. Increasingly, she began to undermine Prince Gong’s influence, leading to his removal from power in 1884. Cixi continued to dominate her son – and through him the Qing court – until his death at the age of nineteen. She then manipulated events so that her 4-year-old nephew, the Guangxu Emperor (r. 1875–1908), would succeed him, allowing her to continue functioning as *de facto* ruler of China and principal obstacle to reform for another 34 years.

Domestic challenges and the rise of rebellion

In addition to the imperialist threat, the late-Qing government also had to deal with internal crises including natural disasters, crumbling infrastructure, and widespread poverty and famine, the effects of which were exacerbated by a demographic surge. Between the late seventeenth century and the end of the eighteenth century, the population more than doubled from nearly 150 million to over 300 million. By 1850, it had risen to 430 million, placing an enormous strain on already scarce resources. Despite agricultural advances such as better irrigation, improved fertilizers, the development of faster-growing and higher yielding varieties of rice, and the introduction of new crops such as maize, sweet potatoes, and peanuts from the Americas, food production could not keep up with the population explosion. Historian Ho Ping-ti writes that by the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Chinese economy could no longer sustain an ever-increasing population without overstraining itself.

A time of crisis

As land parcels shrank, peasants tilled marginal lands and cleared forests in search of arable land, but these short-term gains often led to longer-term problems of soil erosion and flooding. Adding to the peasants' suffering was a succession of natural disasters during the nineteenth century. In 1855, the Yellow River broke out of its channel, causing a series of floods and tens of thousands of deaths. Between 1873 and 1879, three years of drought and subsequent famine in five northern provinces led to an additional 9.5 million deaths, and devastating flood of the Yellow River in 1887 killed nearly two million more. The impact of these natural disasters was intensified by the failure of the Qing government to maintain vital infrastructure, such as the Yellow River dike system, and a dearth of funds for disaster relief, much of which had been misappropriated by corrupt officials.

Changes in the Qing economy further burdened the Chinese populace. An extravagant imperial court, bureaucratic corruption, heavy taxes, and rampant inflation (as much as 300 percent during the eighteenth century) resulted in falling incomes and a rise in real prices for many people. Further economic challenges stemmed from ongoing increases in the price of silver in the first half of the nineteenth century, the result of rising imports of opium, a relatively sluggish market for Chinese exports, and a global decrease in silver production. According to Lin Man-houng, the market price of silver rose from 1,040 copper cash (*wen*) per 1 *liang* of silver ingots in 1808 to 1,637 in 1838, an increase of 600 *wen* in 30 years. Over the next decade, the rate increased even faster, increasing another 600 *wen* to 2,355 in 1849.

The rising price of silver led to a rise in real prices for many Chinese. China had a bimetallic monetary system in which taxes and other large transactions were paid in silver, while other transactions were paid in copper coins. Commoners, who were paid in copper but whose tax payments were pegged to the price of the silver, saw their incomes decline and their costs rise in real terms. Even though many household items could be bought with copper coins, their real prices were affected by the silver's appreciation relative to copper, because merchants generally purchased these products using silver and passed on the cost increases to consumers.

The increasing cost of silver relative to copper also affected government finances. When commoners could no longer afford to convert their copper cash to silver in order to pay their taxes, the government received less revenue. However, even as government revenues fell, administrative costs continued to rise, since taxes were paid in copper and most public expenditures were paid in silver, which the government had to purchase at the market rate. Some Qing scholars have argued that the early nineteenth-century silver crisis may have reduced China's wealth by one half.

The rise of rebellion

The confluence of demographic pressures, natural calamities, economic woes, and a weak and corrupt bureaucracy created an explosive situation throughout much of China in the mid- and late-nineteenth century. Many peasants resorted to female infanticide, slavery, trafficking, and cannibalism to survive, while others turned to banditry, piracy, smuggling, and kidnapping, or joined secret societies to earn their livelihoods. The problem was particularly acute in southern and western China, where the ravages of flood, famine, and disease had been the most widespread. Frustration with the status quo led many poor peasants, the chronically unemployed, and others without adequate means of support to rise up against the Qing dynasty, which they blamed for their plight. Joining them were other disaffected Chinese, including unemployed scholars, drifters, and unmarried men known as "bare sticks" (*guanggun* 光棍), who participated in rebel activities as a way of venting their anger against the government, banding together for mutual support, and securing their economic survival.

The White Lotus Rebellion (1776–1804). One of the largest uprisings to threaten the Qing dynasty was the White Lotus Rebellion, a millenarian revolt that engulfed much western China from 1776 to 1804. The uprising first broke out in western Hubei in 1796, in a mountainous region separating Sichuan, Hubei, and Shaanxi provinces, where corruption and poverty were acute. White Lotus rebels were skilled in using guerilla tactics, and at its height the movement had spread into four other central-western provinces: Henan, Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Gansu.

Led by disciples of the White Lotus movement, a millenarian sect of Amidist Buddhism, the rebellion began as a protest against excessive taxation, but developed into a more generalized attack against Manchu rule. Followers were attracted to White Lotus ideology (which combined elements of Daoism, Buddhism, and Manichaeism) and religious practices, which included meditation, martial arts exercises, mantra recitation, divination, and other ceremonial activities. White Lotus leaders encouraged their followers to "oppose the Qing and restore the Ming" (*fanqing fuming* 反清復明), promising personal salvation in return for their involvement.

To combat the rebels, the dynasty adopted a combination of pacification strategies that included removing all food from the countryside, resettling the populace into armed stockades, offering amnesty to deserters, and organizing captured White Lotus fighters into anti-rebel militias, charged with pursuing and exterminating their former comrades. Although Qing forces eventually were able to put down the rebellion, the effort cost the government an estimated 100 million taels, or 30 percent more than its annual revenue. Moreover, the dynasty's dependence on locally organized militia groups (*tuanlian* 團練) to help quash the uprising, a government strategy that also was adopted during subsequent rebellions, ultimately weakened the Qing state. As Philip A. Kuhn has argued, the development of semi-independent regional militia shifted power into the hands of local elites at the expense of the central government, contributing to a diminution of imperial control over the rural administration of China.

The Nian Rebellion (1851–1868). While the Qing was still reeling from the economic devastation and human tragedy of White Lotus Rebellion, another armed uprising broke out in North China. Known as the Nian Rebellion, possibly referring to the bits of twisted cloth or paper (*nian* 捻) soaked in oil and ignited during their nocturnal raids, the movement began in the late 1840s as a generalized protest against Qing rule. Despite its lack of a coherent ideology, the Nian movement gathered momentum in response to a series of natural disasters that engulfed the North China region. In 1851 and 1855, the Yellow River burst its banks, killing thousands of people and devastating hundreds of thousands of square miles of land. The scale of the disaster and the government's inability to provide effective relief prompted the Nian to launch attacks against Qing troops and carry out raids in search of land and plunder.

As Elizabeth J. Perry has explained, the original goal of the Nian movement was not to bring down the Manchu state. Rather, it was a survival strategy of the weak and downtrodden, who turned to banditry and revolt as a source of livelihood. Supporters of the movement were a loose affiliation of poor peasants, unmarried men, and disaffected scholars, whose numbers were augmented by scattered followers of earlier rebel movements such as the White Lotus uprising. Over time, however, the Nian evolved from isolated bandit gangs, to coordinated armies of families, clans, and entire communities. Despite its relatively small size – an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 troops – the Nian Army was a fierce fighting force known for its mastery of mobile warfare, effective firepower, and successful use of guerrilla warfare.

By the mid-1850s, Nian rebels had succeeded in capturing large tracts of land in north and central China, crushing government forces in the countryside, and devastating large areas within Jiangsu and Hunan provinces. To put down the rebellion, the Manchu leadership again was forced to rely on aid from regional militias, a strategy that helped to crush the rebels, but which contributed to a further devolution of state power. Also supporting the Qing was the Ever Victorious Army, a 5000-strong corps of Chinese soldiers who were trained and led by American and European officers under the command of Frederick Townsend Ward (1831–1862), an American sailor and mercenary, who molded the Ever Victorious Army into a well-equipped, highly trained, and mobile fighting force that became a model for later Chinese armies. Even with this support, Qing government was unable to achieve victory over the Nian until 1868, after years of fierce fighting and an immense loss of life and property.

The Muslim Rebellions (1855–1873, 1862–1877). During the mid-nineteenth century, several Muslim-led rebellions broke out in multi-ethnic areas of southern and western China. Muslims had lived in northwest and southwest China since the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), but in many areas they still formed distinct religious communities. In 1853, a conflict between two different ethnic groups, the Han and the Hui, broke out in the southwestern province of Yunnan. In the ensuing turmoil, existing religious and ethnic tensions between the Muslim Hui and non-Muslim ethnic minorities were brought to the fore. This sparked a multi-ethnic uprising that engulfed the entire province, which eventually developed into an anti-Manchu insurgency. Alternatively referred to as the Panthay Rebellion (1855–1873), after the Burmese term for Muslim Chinese, or the Du Wenxiu 杜文秀 Rebellion, after the anti-Manchu leader of the movement, the revolt resulted in the loss of up to a million lives. In the northwestern provinces of Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, and Xinjiang, the Dungan 東干 revolt (1862–1877), an uprising of Muslim Hui and other Muslim ethnic groups, led to an additional tens of millions of deaths.

The Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864)

Far more destructive than the White Lotus, Nian, and Muslim Rebellions was the Taiping Rebellion, one of the bloodiest wars in human history. Although Taiping means "Great Peace," the movement devastated much of South China, and resulted in the loss of 20–30 million people and the displacement of millions more. According to some estimates, by the rebellion's end, the population in many cities and towns in the lower Yangzi region had fallen by half. The war was fought over 14 years, primarily in the provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Jiangxi, and Hubei. Even by the 1950s, some parts of central China had not yet fully recovered from the destruction of the Taiping era.

The founder of the movement was Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全 (1814–1864), a disappointed scholar and self-proclaimed prophet, who believed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus. Hong was a member of the oppressed Hakka minority who had initially aspired to a career in the civil service, but was unable to pass the government examinations. After his third failed attempt, he fell into a 40-day coma and experienced a series of visions, which became the foundation of the quasi-Christian ideology of the Taipings. Hong's political doctrine incorporated elements of Confucian tradition, Christian theology, and anti-Manchu rhetoric. Opium, alcohol, adultery, gambling, and foot-binding were banned, while gender equality, communal property, and social equality were supported. Sometime after 1844, Hong began collecting followers, and in 1851, he proclaimed himself Heavenly King of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (Taiping Tianguo 太平天國). He assembled an army of followers, and in 1853, captured the city of Nanjing, which he established it as the capital of the Taiping movement.

Defeating the Taiping was beyond the resources of the regular Qing military forces, so the government turned to elite activists in the provinces for help. One of the prominent militarists who responded to the call was Zeng Guofan, who organized the Xiang Army, a provincial fighting force recruited from existing village and regional militias across the Hunan region. Others who came to the dynasty's aid were Li Hongzhang, commander of the Anhui-based Huai Army, and Zuo Zongtang (1812–1884), an official and military leader who coordinated Qing forces to fight the rebels with the support of British and French troops. Together, these groups were able to defeat the Taipings, temporarily restoring the stability of the dynasty, but accelerating the devolution of political power away from the central government to the provinces.

Although the Qing emerged victorious over the Taipings and other rebel groups, the dynasty was so weakened by these conflicts that it was unable to effectively reestablish control over the empire. The upheavals affected every region across China, causing tens of millions of deaths, countless displacements, and untold destruction of property. The enormous cost of putting down these uprisings drained government treasuries, forcing it to raise taxes on the already embattled poor, and exacerbating China's difficulties in dealing with its external challenges.

The Sino-Japanese war and its aftermath

While the Manchu leadership struggled to deal with its internal challenges, the imperialist powers continued to expand their influence within China. Despite earlier efforts by the Self-Strengtheners to modernize and industrialize, meaningful change had been stymied by the Empress Dowager and her conservative allies. By contrast, Japan had made rapid progress under the newly established Meiji government, presenting an additional threat to Chinese autonomy and influence within the Asian region.

In 1868, a group of Japanese reformers wrested control from the military clan that had ruled Japan since 1600. They "restored" authority to the 15-year-old Meiji emperor, establishing him as the nominal leader of a group of oligarchs whose mission was to modernize Japan. The Meiji oligarchs shared a common vision of the imperialist threat and the painful measures required to achieve their modernization goals, summarized in the motto: "Rich country, strong military." Acting in the emperor's name, the oligarchs introduced a series of revolutionary policies that would help Japan become the first non-Western nation to successfully industrialize. By the early 1890s, Japan had put in place a new Western-style constitution and elected its first national assembly; established a new standardized currency and a modern banking system; promoted strategic and military industrialization; developed a national railway system and modern communications; and invested in a well-equipped and Western-trained army and navy.

The clash over Korea

The success of the Meiji reforms fueled Japanese ambitions for expansion within the Asian region in search of raw materials, untapped markets, and enhanced international standing. Japan first sets its sights on Korea, attracted by the country's strategic location and abundant natural resources of coal and iron. Korea, a leading tributary state during Ming and Qing times, had long been dominated by China. In the late 1880s, however, Japan began challenging the status quo to increase its influence in the region. In 1875, Japan forced Korea to declare itself an independent state and to open itself up to foreign trade. When an armed revolt by Korean peasants broke out in 1894, both China and Japan sent in troops to protect the Korean king and reestablish order. The ensuing rivalry over dominance over the region resulted in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895).

The war ended in a decisive victory for Japan, quashing any doubts about the superiority of the Japanese war machine over China's aging military. For two decades, Japan had invested in modern ships and arsenals, supported by Western naval training and tactics. By contrast, much of the funding that had been allocated to rebuild the Chinese navy had been diverted by the Empress Dowager to build herself an extravagant summer palace northwest of Beijing. Following the destruction of China's ill-trained and poorly equipped Beiyang 北洋 fleet by the Imperial Japanese Navy, Japanese troops overpowered Chinese forces on the Korean peninsula and the southern part of Manchuria. As Japanese forces closed in on Beijing, the Qing was forced to surrender.

China's ignominious defeat after 30 years of Self-Strengthening was followed by the additional humiliation of the peace agreement. Under the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895), China was forced to recognize the total independence of Korea and ceded the Liaodong Peninsula in southern Manchuria, the island of Taiwan, and Penghu Islands to Japan "in perpetuity." The Qing government also signed a commercial treaty permitting Japanese ships to navigate the Yangzi River, operate manufacturing factories in treaty ports, and open four more ports to foreign trade. In addition, the Qing Empire had to pay Japan 200 million silver taels in war reparations.

The scramble for concessions

To the West, the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese conflict signaled a shift in regional dominance from China to Japan. Taking advantage of China's weakness, imperialist powers demanded territorial concessions: enclaves within key cities or regions in which a single European nation and/or the Empire of Japan were granted special privileges. In the ensuing free-for-all to extract diplomatic and trade privileges from the ailing Qing dynasty – metaphorically described as "cutting up the Chinese melon" – the Russians obtained economic and territorial rights in Manchuria and negotiated a 99-year lease on Port Arthur (now Lüshun) on the Liaodong

Peninsula. To the south, Germany seized the Chinese port of Qingdao, in Shandong province; Britain was granted concessions along the Yangzi River and in the New Territories opposite Hong Kong; and France obtained railway and mining privileges in South China, adjacent to their colonial holdings in Indochina.

The scramble for concessions divided China into quasi-colonial "spheres of influence," which were governed and policed by the imperialist powers. What saved China from complete partition was the 1899 Open Door Policy, a non-binding declaration that was circulated by the United States, with British backing. The goal of the policy was to discourage individual powers from securing exclusive – "closed door" – concessions within their independent spheres of influence, allowing all powers to benefit from equal – "open door" – commercial opportunities anywhere in China. Although the Open Door Policy was merely a statement of intention and not a formal course of action, it helped to preserve what was left of China's territorial and administrative integrity.

While the Open Door Policy may have saved the Qing Empire from immediate collapse, the domination of entire provinces by imperialist powers dealt a devastating blow to the prestige and power of the Qing Empire. The division of China into foreigner-directed spheres of influence, whose non-native residents were granted near complete immunity from local laws and jurisdiction, contributed to public resentment toward foreigners and hostility toward the Manchu leadership. Many educated Chinese blamed the Empress Dowager and her conservative allies for the government's failure to adopt policies to help China stand up to the imperialist threat. However, despite widespread agreement about the need for change, there was little consensus about what nature the change should take.

The reform movement of 1898

Even among reform-minded officials, there were concerns about the negative effects of modernization. The Confucian scholar-official Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1813–1909), for example, was an avid supporter of railway and mining development, but wanted to ensure that China's traditional values would not be sacrificed in the process. By comparison, the classically trained scholar and political activist Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) argued that economic development and social change was not necessarily at odds with traditional values. In his 1898 essay "A Study of Confucius as a Reformer" (Zongzi gaizhi kao 孔子改制考), Kang wrote that Confucianism was not incompatible with progress, and that the government could institute reforms while upholding its fundamental values.

In 1895, Kang and his student Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) submitted a memorial discussing their ideas for reform, which was signed by more than 1200 provincial graduates, who had gathered in Beijing to sit for the metropolitan (*jinshi* 進士) examinations. Although the Guangxu emperor (r. 1875–1908) seems to have supported many of the proposals, he made no attempt to implement them until 1898, when the Empress Dowager announced her retirement from public life. Taking advantage of her departure, Kang and Liang persuaded the 23-year-old emperor to launch an ambitious program of economic, industrial, and administrative reforms, following the Meiji example. Over a period of three months, the emperor enacted new laws to modernize the civil service exams to include more practical subject; revitalize the military with better firearms, artillery, and Western-style training; support new industries through targeted investment, technical education, and infrastructural improvements; and clean up the bureaucracy through the abolition of sinecures and the end to governmental waste and corruption.

Afraid that the new policies would jeopardize the Manchu hold on power and her own interests, the Empress Dowager took decisive action to crush the reform effort. With the help of her loyal supporters, she staged a military coup and placed the Guangxu emperor under house arrest, where he remained until his death in 1908. Reformers who fell into her clutches were executed; however, movement leaders Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao escaped her wrath by fleeing to Japan. For the next decade, they traveled widely, visiting overseas Chinese communities to gather support for their vision of a constitution monarchy. With the reactionaries back in control and the reform movement in disarray, China fell further into decline.

Collapse of the imperial order

The Empress Dowager's coup d'état crushed the nascent reform movement and gave greater rein to conservative and xenophobic forces at court and among the populace at large. The proliferation of international concessions, within which the imperialist powers enjoyed special privileges and immunity from Qing law, contributed to the rise of anti-foreignism. Some critics drew a connection between foreign activity and the frequency of natural disasters, suggesting that the construction of railroads, mines, and other infrastructure had disturbed the harmonious balance between men and nature, leading to drought, floods, and famine.

Further fomenting public anger was the presence of foreign missionaries, who in 1860 had gained the right to proselytize and build churches throughout the empire. Some Chinese claimed that Christian missionaries had offended the spirits by propagating a heterodox religion that conflicted with traditional Confucian values, while others opposed the often heavy-handed tactics that missionaries used to attract converts. Helping to fan the fire were anti-Christian pamphlets that disseminated scurrilous rumors about missionaries and converts, accusing them of engaging in cannibalism, sexual perversion, and other vile acts. As the century ended, popular anger against the missionaries and other foreigners had reached a fever pitch, exploding into violence during the Boxer Rebellion of 1899–1900.

The Boxer Rebellion

The Boxer Rebellion was led by members of a secret society known as the "Righteous Harmonious Fists" (Yihequan 義和拳), whom Westerners dubbed the "Boxers" because of the style of martial arts that they practiced. Economic hardship and political instability contributed to the growth of the Boxer movement, which was particularly active in the provinces of Shandong, Honan, Jiangsu, Anhui, and Zhili. The movement's early spread was fueled by resentment against the Manchus, whom many Chinese blamed for the country's worsening economic and political condition. Beginning in the 1890s, however, the Boxers abandoned their anti-dynastic emphasis in favor of an anti-foreign message, reflecting their belief that Western imperialists and Christian missionaries posed a greater threat to China than did the Manchu court.

The Boxers' new pro-Manchu and anti-imperialist stance – embodied in their slogan "support the Qing and destroy the foreigner" – drew support from the Empress Dowager and her conservative allies. Resisting foreign pressure to quell the Boxer threat, the court took little or no action against rebels who attacked Christian missionaries or their Chinese converts. When the Boxers besieged the foreign legation quarter in Beijing in June of 1900, the court backed the insurgents and declared war on the foreign powers. In response, the Eight-Nation Alliance (a military coalition of eight imperialist powers with interests in

China, led by Britain and Germany) sent in 30,000 troops to put down the rebellion, decimating Boxer armies and compelling the Empress Dowager to flee for her life. In defeat, the Empress Dowager attempted to convince her former adversaries that she had not backed the Boxers. Although this was demonstrably untrue, the imperialist powers decided to go along with the fiction because the restoration of order under Qing rule allowed them to continue exploiting China's weakness.

The end of the rebellion led to the occupation of Beijing by foreign troops for more than a year and spelled disaster for China, which again had to make reparations to foreign governments. Under the terms of the Boxer Protocol of 1901, signed between China and members of the Eight-Nation Alliance, the imperialist powers had the right to post troops in major Chinese cities. In addition, the settlement not only called for the execution of suspected Boxers and the government officials who had supported them, but also imposed war reparations of 450 million silver dollars on China, nearly twice the government's yearly revenues. In a 1901 essay attacking the immorality and rapaciousness of the imperialist powers, the American humorist Mark Twain satirically described the lopsided terms of the Protocol as: "Taels I win, Heads you lose."

The indemnity was to be paid in gold over a period of 39 years, with annual interest rate of 4 percent. When the interest on existing foreign loans was added, the combined debt absorbed all the customs revenue, forcing the government to borrow money from foreign banks in order to service the debt. In a gesture of goodwill, the United States agreed to return its share of the indemnity money to China on the condition that it would be used to send Chinese students to study in American institutions. The education of significant numbers of future leaders in the United States was one of the few positive results of China's disastrous defeat.

The Qing "New Policies"

Following the Boxer catastrophe, even diehard traditionalists were forced to acknowledge the need for substantive change. After decades of opposition, the Empress Dowager called on central and provincial officials, and envoys stationed abroad, to propose reforms to help China become more competitive in the modern world. Many of the suggested improvements were similar to policies originally put forth during the Self-Strengthening and the Hundred Days' Reform movements. The important difference was that the post-Boxer policies were supported by Chinese conservatives, who had stood in the way of progress for over 40 years.

Between 1901 and 1905, the court enacted a series of "New Policies" to revitalize the bureaucracy through the abolition of obsolete offices and creation of new ones; modernize the military by scrapping the traditional military examination and embracing Western training and tactics; and transform society by prohibiting foot-binding and opium use and loosening the marriage laws that disadvantaged women. The policies also supported study and travel in Japan, the United States, and Europe so that young Chinese could learn more about foreign institutions and methods for obtaining wealth and power. In 1905, the government abolished the traditional examination system, which for hundreds of years had evaluated official aspirants based on their understanding of Confucian values, replacing it with a modern curriculum that emphasized science and technology, foreign languages, and international affairs.

The response to these policies was mixed. Some of the measures taken, such as the increase in taxes to fund the New Policies, spurred unrest in the countryside. Other critics argued that reforming the existing system did not go far enough to resolve China's problems.

Frustrated by what they viewed as the corruption and intransigence of the Manchu regime, many activists called for a complete dismantling of the imperial system and the establishment of a republican government based on constitutional principles.

From empire to republic

One of the most prominent revolutionaries was Sun Yat-sen 孫逸仙 (Sun Yixian (1866–1925), who played an instrumental role in the overthrow of the Qing state. Sun believed that the Manchu leadership had been ineffective in its efforts to confront foreign aggression and modernize China. He wanted to replace the dynastic system with a republic based on the "Three Principles of the People." This was the political philosophy that he had developed, which emphasized the principles of "nationalism" (independence from foreign domination), "democracy" (representative government), and "livelihood" (economic security). Sun Yat-sen visited the United States, Europe, and Japan, and regions of southeast Asia where large concentrations of overseas Chinese resided to gain political and financial backing for his revolutionary program.

While Sun was traveling abroad in support of the revolution, anti-Qing activists were working within China to destabilize the dynasty by disseminating revolutionary ideas and carrying out acts of insurgency. On October 10, 1911, a group of rebels led a military uprising in the city of Wuchang in Hubei province. The uprising began as a protest against the handling of a railway crisis, but rapidly escalated into an empire-wide revolt that eventually toppled the Qing dynasty. The Revolution of 1911, also known as the Xinhai Revolution (because within the 60-year cycle of the traditional Chinese calendar, 1911 is referred to as the *xinhai* 辛亥 year), culminated with the abdication of 6-year-old Puyi 溥儀, the last Qing emperor, on February 12, 2012.

The end of more than 2,000 years of imperial rule marked the beginning of a new future for China. However, the establishment of republican government did not resolve China's domestic and foreign challenges. Natural calamities, famine, and poverty continued to plague the countryside, which was still reeling from the effects of the Taiping rebellion and other peasant uprisings. In regions throughout the former Qing Empire, warlord generals rose to dominance, and imperialist powers continued to take advantage of China's weakness to gain economic and political benefits for themselves. Meanwhile, internal dissent and factionalism within the newly formed republic undermined its effectiveness, giving rise to popular discontent among the military and populace. During the early twentieth century, the negative consequences of over a century of imperialist encroachment and domestic strife, legacies of the Qing dynasty, were compounded by the scourges of warlordism, civil war, and Japanese aggression. Just as the fall of the Qing had been a long and complex process, so too was the rise of modern China from a weak nation wracked by poverty, corruption, and war, to the global power it is today.

Note

1 "Lin Tse-hsü's Moral Advice to Queen Victoria, 1839," in Ssu-yü Teng and John King Fairbank, eds., *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839–1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 24–28.