

Challenge and Tradition in East Asia, 1800-1914

THE STORY MATTERS...

In the nineteenth century, the Qing dynasty's growing weakness led to civil war, rebellion, and Western intervention. Followers of reformer Sun Yat-sen began an uprising in 1911 that ended the Qing dynasty and more than two thousand years of imperial rule. However, the new Chinese republic was not strong enough to maintain control, and China slipped into civil disorder and the rule of warlords. Throughout this period, Western economic and cultural influence on China continued to grow.

Lesson 26-1

The Decline of the Qing Dynasty

READING HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

highlighted exclusive

Content Vocabulary

extraterritoriality self-strengthening

spheres of influence Open Door policy

indemnity

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How can new ideas accelerate economic and political change?
- How do cultures influence each other?

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

China preferred to keep its culture free of Western influences. However, as the Qing government grew more unstable, foreign powers created spheres of influence and pursued a policy to secure trading rights. The Chinese resisted but were eventually overcome, weakening the imperial government even more.

Causes of Decline

GUIDING QUESTION *What factors influenced the decline of the Qing Empire?*

In 1800, after a long period of peace and prosperity, the Qing dynasty of the Manchus was at the height of its power. A little more than a century later, however, humiliated and harassed by the Western powers, the Qing dynasty collapsed.

One important reason for the abrupt decline and fall of the Qing dynasty was the intense external pressure that the modern West applied to Chinese society. However, internal problems also played a role.

After an extended period of growth, the Qing dynasty began to suffer from corruption, peasant unrest, and incompetence. These weaknesses were made worse by rapid growth in the country's population. By 1900, there were 400 million people in China. Population growth created a serious food shortage. In the 1850s, one observer wrote, "Not a year passes in which a terrific number of persons do not perish of famine in some part or other of China."

The ships, guns, and ideas of foreigners highlighted the growing weakness of the Qing dynasty and probably hastened its end. By 1800, Europeans had been in contact with China for more than 200 years. Wanting to limit contact with outsiders, the Qing dynasty had restricted European merchants to a small trading outlet at Guangzhou (GWAHNG • JOH), or Canton. The merchants could deal with only a few Chinese firms. The British did not like this arrangement.

Britain had a trade deficit, or an unfavorable trade balance, with China. That is, it imported more goods from China than it exported to China. Britain had to pay China with silver for the difference between its imports – tea, silk, and porcelain – from China and its exports – Indian cotton – to China. At first, the British tried to negotiate with the Chinese to improve the trade imbalance. When negotiations failed, the British turned to trading opium.

The Opium War

Opium was grown in northern India under the sponsorship of the British East India Company and then shipped directly to Chinese markets. Demand for opium – a highly addictive drug – in South China jumped dramatically. Soon, silver was flowing out of China and into the pockets of the officials of the British East India Company.

The Chinese reacted strongly. They appealed to the British government on moral grounds to stop the traffic in opium. Lin Zexu, a Chinese government official, wrote to Queen Victoria:

PRIMARY SOURCE

"Suppose there were people from another country who carried opium for sale to England and seduced your people into buying and smoking it; certainly your honorable ruler would deeply hate it and be bitterly aroused."

– quoted in *The British Imperial Century, 1815-1914*

The British refused to halt their activity, however. As a result, the Chinese blockaded the foreign area in Guangzhou to force traders to surrender their opium. The

British responded with force, starting the Opium War (1839-1842).

The Chinese were no match for the British. British warships destroyed Chinese coastal and river forts. When a British fleet sailed almost unopposed up the Chang Jiang (Yangtze River) to Nanjing, the Qing dynasty made peace.

In the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, the Chinese agreed to open five coastal ports to British trade, limit taxes on imported British goods, and pay for the costs of the war. China also agreed to give the British ownership of the island of Hong Kong. Nothing was said in the treaty about the opium trade.

Moreover, in the five ports, Europeans lived in their own sections and were subject not to Chinese laws but to their own laws – a practice known as extraterritoriality.

The Opium War marked the beginning of the establishment of Western influence in China. For the time being, the Chinese dealt with the problem by pitting foreign countries against one another. Concessions granted to the British were offered to other Western nations, including the United States. Soon, thriving foreign areas were operating in the five treaty ports along the southern Chinese coast.

The Tai Ping Rebellion

In the meantime, the failure of the Chinese government to deal with pressing internal economic problems led to a peasant revolt, known as the Tai Ping (TIE PING) Rebellion (1850-1864). It was led by Hong Xiuquan, a Christian convert who viewed himself as a younger brother of Jesus.

Hong was convinced that God had given him the mission of destroying the Qing dynasty. Joined by great crowds of peasants, Hong captured the town of Yongan and proclaimed a new dynasty, the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace (Tai Ping Tianguo in Chinese – hence the name of the rebellion.)

In March 1853, the rebels seized Nanjing, the second largest city of the empire, and massacred 25,000 men, women, and children. The revolt continued for 10 more years but gradually began to fall apart. Europeans came to the aid of the Qing dynasty when they realized the destructive nature of the Tai Ping forces. One British observer noted there was “no hope of any good ever coming of the rebel movement. They do nothing but burn, murder, and destroy.”

In 1864, Chinese forces, with European aid, recaptured Nanjing and destroyed the remaining rebel force. The Tai Ping Rebellion was one of the most devastating civil wars in history. As many as 20 million people died during the 14-year struggle.

China's ongoing struggle with the West prevented the Qing dynasty from dealing effectively with the internal unrest. Beginning in 1856, the British and the French applied force to gain greater trade privileges. As a result of the Treaty of Tianjin in 1858, the Chinese agreed to

legalize the opium trade and to open new ports to foreign trade. They also surrendered the Kowloon Peninsula to Great Britain.

Efforts at Reform

By the late 1870s, the Qing dynasty was in decline. Unable to restore order themselves, government troops had relied on forces recruited by regional warlords to help fight the Tai Ping Rebellion. To finance their armies, the warlords had collected taxes from local people. After the revolt, many of these warlords kept their armies.

In its weakened state, the Qing court finally began to listen to the appeals of reform-minded officials. The reformers called for a new policy they called “self-strengthening.” That is, China should adopt Western technology but keep its Confucian values and institutions.

Some reformers wanted to change China's traditional political institutions by introducing democracy. However, such ideas were too radical for most reformers. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Chinese government tried to modernize China's military forces and build up industry without touching the basic elements of Chinese civilization. Railroads, weapons factories, and shipyards were built. However, the Chinese value system remained unchanged.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Analyzing Information Why do you think the Qing dynasty wanted to limit contact with foreign nations?

The Advance of Imperialism

GUIDING QUESTION *Why were spheres of influence established in China?*

In the end, however, the changes did not help the Qing stay in power. The European advance into China continued during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Internal conditions also continued to deteriorate.

Mounting Pressures

In the north and northeast, Russia took advantage of the Qing dynasty's weakness to force China to give up territories north of the Amur River in Siberia. In Tibet, a struggle between Russia and Great Britain kept both powers from seizing the territory outright. This allowed Tibet to become free from Chinese influence.

Even more ominous changes were taking place in the Chinese heartland. European states began to create spheres of influence, areas in which the imperial powers had exclusive trading rights. After the Tai Ping Rebellion, warlords in the provinces began to negotiate directly with foreign nations. In return for money, the warlords granted these nations exclusive trading rights or railroad-building and mining privileges. In this way, Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and Japan all established spheres of influence in China.

In 1894, another blow furthered the disintegration of the Qing dynasty. The Chinese went to war with Japan over Japanese inroads into Korea, a land that the Chinese had controlled for a long time. The Chinese were soundly

defeated. Japan demanded and received the island of Taiwan and the Liaodong (LYOW • DOONG) Peninsula. Fearing Japan's growing power, however, the European powers forced Japan to give the Liaodong Peninsula back to China.

New pressures for Chinese territory soon arose. In 1897, Chinese rioters murdered two German missionaries. Germany used this incident as a pretext to demand territories in the Shandong (SHON • DOONG) Peninsula. When the Chinese government approved the demand, other European nations made new claims on Chinese territory.

Internal Crisis

This latest scramble for territory took place at a time of internal crisis in China. In June 1898, the young emperor Guang Xu (GWANG SHYOO) launched a massive reform program based on changes in Japan. During the following weeks, known as the One Hundred Days of Reform, the emperor issued edicts calling for major political, administrative, and education reforms. With these reforms, Guang Xu intended to modernize government bureaucracy by following Western models; to adopt a new education system that would replace the traditional civil service examinations; and to adopt Western-style schools, banks, and a free press. Guang Xu also intended to train the military to use modern weapons and Western fighting techniques.

Many conservatives at court, however, opposed these reforms. They saw little advantage in copying the West. As one said, "An examination of the causes of success and failure in government reveals that ... the adoption of foreignism leads to disorder." According to this conservative, traditional Chinese rules needed to be reformed and not rejected in favor of Western changes.

Most important, Empress Dowager Ci Xi (TSUH • SEE), the emperor's aunt, opposed the new reform program. Ci Xi became a dominant force at court and opposed the emperor's reforms. With the aid of the imperial army, she eventually imprisoned the emperor. Other supporters of the reforms were imprisoned, exiled, or prosecuted. These actions ended Guang Xu's reforms. Although Guang Xu's efforts aroused popular sympathy, they had limited support within Chinese society overall.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Drawing Conclusions Why did Guang Xu's reforms fail to achieve the modernization of the government and military?

Responses to Imperialism

GUIDING QUESTION *What were the responses to imperialism in China?*

As foreign pressure on the Qing dynasty grew stronger, both Great Britain and the United States feared that other nations would overrun the country should the Chinese government collapse.

Opening the Door to China

In 1899, U.S. secretary of state John Hay wrote a note to Britain, Russia, Germany, France, Italy, and Japan. Hay presented a proposal that ensured equal access to the Chinese market for all nations and preserved the unity of the Chinese empire. When none of the other imperialist governments expressed opposition to the idea, Hay proclaimed that all major states with economic interests in China had agreed that the country should have an Open Door policy.

In part, the Open Door policy reflected American concern for the survival of China. However, it also reflected the interests of some U.S. trading companies. These companies wanted to operate in open markets and disliked the existing division of China into separate spheres of influence dominated by individual countries.

The Open Door policy did not end the system of spheres of influence. However, it did reduce restrictions on foreign imports imposed by the dominating power within each sphere. The Open Door policy also helped reduce imperialist hysteria over access to the China market. The policy lessened fears in Britain, France, Germany, and Russia that other powers would take advantage of China's weakness and attempt to dominate the China market for themselves.

The Boxer Rebellion

The Open Door policy came too late to stop the Boxer Rebellion. Boxer was the popular name given to members of a secret organization called the Society of Harmonious Fists. Members practiced a system of exercise – a form of shadowboxing, or boxing with an imaginary opponent – that they thought would protect them from bullets.

The Boxers were upset by economic distress and the foreign takeover of Chinese lands. They wanted to push foreigners out of China. Their slogan was "destroy the foreigner." They especially disliked Christian missionaries and Chinese converts to Christianity who seemed to threaten Chinese traditions. At the beginning of 1900, Boxer bands roamed the countryside and slaughtered foreign missionaries and Chinese Christians. Foreign business people and the German envoy to Beijing were also victims.

Response to the killings was immediate and overwhelming. An allied army consisting of 20,000 British, French, German, Russian, American, and Japanese troops attacked Beijing in August 1900. The army restored order and demanded more concessions from the Chinese government. The Chinese government was forced to pay a heavy indemnity to the powers that had crushed the uprising. The imperial government was now weaker than ever.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Drawing Conclusions Did the Boxer Rebellion do anything to reduce the foreign presence in China? Explain your answer.

Vocabulary

extraterritoriality living in a section of a country set aside for foreigners but not subject to the host country's laws

self-strengthening a policy promoted by reformers toward the end of the Qing dynasty under which China would adopt Western technology while keeping its Confucian values and institutions

spheres of influence areas in which foreign powers have been granted exclusive rights and privileges, such as trading rights and mining privileges

extraterritoriality living in a section of a country set aside for foreigners but not subject to the host country's laws

Open Door policy a policy, proposed by U.S. secretary of state John Hay in 1899, that stated all powers with spheres of influence in China would respect equal trading opportunities with China and not set tariffs giving an unfair advantage to the citizens of their own country