

The Qing Dynasty of China

The Qing Dynasty, which endured from 1644 to 1912, was perhaps the greatest and most powerful Chinese dynasty in history. For centuries, the Chinese had proclaimed that China was at the center of the world, and for the first century-and-a-half under Qing rule, this longstanding doctrine endured no challenges. Under the Qing, China's territories expanded to their greatest extent. The empire was a regional power and directed, or attempted to direct, the policy of nearby countries like Japan and Korea. The Chinese also controlled all interactions with Europeans. European consumers greatly desired Chinese goods and European traders wanted access to Chinese markets, but the Qing decided that as Europeans had nothing *they* wanted, contact with them should be minimal.

The decline of the Qing Dynasty in the nineteenth century came as the European powers had, collectively and individually, grown much stronger, and soon the Europeans were calling the shots in China. The Qing Dynasty eventually collapsed in 1911 after decades of rebellion.

Qing Dynasty: Beginnings and Expansion

The Qing Dynasty began with the ascendancy of the Jurchen people, a semi-nomadic group from the northeast of present-day China. A Jurchen leader, Nurhachi, began a rebellion against the ruling Ming Dynasty in 1618 and quickly enlisted the aid of many Mongolian tribes. The ensuing civil war lasted almost three decades and caused massive loss of life; Nurhachi himself died in 1626. After years of fighting, the Jurchen and Mongol forces accumulated victories and allies under Hong Taiji, Nurhachi's eighth son. Hong's forces defeated the Ming in a series of crucial battles from 1640 to 1642, at the end of which most of the Ming soldiers surrendered. Hong died in 1643, but after a power struggle his five-year-old son, Hong Fulin, a compromise candidate, was named emperor. The dynasty dates from 1644, when Beijing was captured, though Qing forces took another seventeen years to subdue the rest of their territories.

The Qing Dynasty quickly established itself in a period that soon became known as the Golden Age of Qing power. This period was characterized by the long, stable reign of a few emperors, the conquest of territory, and the consolidation of the empire. The dynasty inaugurated the Golden Age under the rule of Hong Fulin's son, who called himself the Kangxi emperor¹ when he took power. It also acquired great swathes of territory, even exceeding those controlled by the Tang Dynasty in the eighth century CE. These territorial acquisitions took various forms. First, three lords who controlled border areas rose up against the Kangxi emperor. The rebellion was defeated, and the Kangxi emperor claimed their lands. Next, the leaders of Outer Mongolia and Tibet sought Chinese aid in repelling invasion; the Kangxi emperor helped to repel the invasion and then incorporated those territories into the empire. Finally, another group of rebels was using Taiwan as a base for attacks against the Qing, so China took over that island as

¹ All emperors in the Qing dynasty took a single "era name" when they took power, much like a king or the pope takes a different name upon assuming the throne.

well. The empire had thus grown in strength and territory in the first few decades of Qing rule.

The Kangxi emperor's 65-year tenure was the longest of any Chinese emperor to date, and has never been matched. The Golden Age that begun under his rule continued with the crowning of his fourth son, who called himself the Yongzheng emperor. The Yongzheng emperor continued to conquer territory – Chinese forces captured more land in the Northwest – but his primary achievements were the consolidation and strengthening of the empire. In particular, he focused his efforts on improving imperial administration; he attempted to root out corrupt officials and led an effort to restore the standards of the State Examinations, which had been a hallmark of the Chinese bureaucracy since the seventh century. (The Chinese civil service was traditionally very prestigious, and as competition was fierce, anyone who wanted to join had to take a series of rigorous exams.) The Yongzheng emperor also enacted heavy penalties on anyone convicted of manipulating the exchange rates of coins.

The son of the Yongzheng emperor became the Qianlong emperor, and his reign perpetuated the greatness achieved under his ancestors. Chinese forces conquered further territory to the North and West, put down several uprisings, and strengthened control over Tibet. The Qianlong emperor also inaugurated a massive cultural initiative that resulted in the production and reproduction of thousands of books. The emperor's support of culture, however, belies the degree to which he censored writers; those whom the emperor perceived to be writing negative works were regularly persecuted. Such persecution had been much more infrequent under the previous Qing emperors. Late in Qianlong's reign, moreover, the bureaucracy began to return to corrupt ways. The end of Qianlong's reign in 1796 perhaps marks the beginning of the decline of the Qing Dynasty.

The Qing Dynasty and the Western World

The Chinese had long believed that their country was the center of the world and was superior to all other countries. Until the nineteenth century China remained the strongest regional power, moreover, which strengthened this perception. The attitude that the Chinese adopted with relation to the Western empires that attempted to trade with them reflected the belief that China was the greatest world power and all other countries were tributaries. European trade was limited to the port of Canton, and the Chinese regarded such trade as unimportant. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the European powers abided by these restrictions.

Though the Chinese viewed trade with Europeans as unimportant, the Europeans did not share this belief. While various European colonies had been established in India and present-day Indonesia, China was considered the most important area for imperial expansion. A 1793 British East India Company mission under Lord George Macartney sought to convince the Chinese to open up to trade with Europe, but with no success. The Chinese repeated that they would only trade with Europeans in Canton and would only pay in silver. Moreover, they had no interest in European goods.

The British, who were the main European power interested in China, eventually grew frustrated with their lack of access to Chinese markets. Moreover, while demand for opium was strong in China, the restrictions meant that the British, who were supplying the opium, could not make as much profit as they wanted to. They also found it difficult to meet the increased demand for opium. As you read in subunit 5.3.1, however, advances in weaponry and shipbuilding technology gave the British a clear technological advantage over the Chinese. They exploited this advantage in the Opium Wars of the 1840s, when the steel-hulled British steamships soundly defeated the wooden Chinese junks. (A later reading will give you more detail about the Opium Wars.) The victorious British imposed the Treaty of Nanjing on the Chinese. The treaty gave Europeans access to all Chinese ports, ceded Hong Kong to Britain, and allowed the British to trade as much opium in China as they wanted.

The Treaty of Nanjing was the first of what the Chinese call the Unequal Treaties, and marked the beginning of China's swift decline in international affairs. The British and Chinese fought the Second Opium War over the terms of the treaty; when Britain won the war, they imposed the Treaty of Tientsin, which was more humiliating than the first. The new treaty gave the British free access to all Chinese waterways, in addition to the ports specified in the previous treaty, and required that all Chinese government documents also be written in English. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Chinese were forced to sign more than a dozen treaties with the European empires and the United States. Among the clauses of these other Unequal Treaties, China was forced to cede Macau to Portugal and provide the other Western empires with free access to Chinese ports and cities.

The Chinese grew frustrated with the European empires' attitude towards them, and although they were unable to effect any changes, they did attempt to do so. In 1898 a Chinese nationalist movement called the Boxers attempted to have all Europeans expelled from China. (You will learn more about this event, which is called the Boxer Rebellion, in a later reading.) Though elements in the Chinese government, including the emperor's mother, supported the rebellion, the European powers eventually stepped in to rescue the Qing government. The peace settlement, which the European powers imposed, declared that the Chinese should pay an enormous sum in reparations to the Europeans. The European powers eventually rescinded their demands for payment, but the entire affair humiliated the Qing government at home and provided another impetus for the forces of change that soon threatened the dynasty.

Rebellion and Unrest: The End of the Qing Dynasty

Since the Qing emperors controlled a large territory with many ethnicities, rebellion was often part of the cost associated with their empires. This is perhaps what made the rebellion of the White Lotus Society in the late 1700s noteworthy; instead of being started by a border lord looking to claim the Mandate of Heaven (the Chinese parallel to the Divine Right of Kings), it was started by the Chinese themselves. Later, the emperor acknowledged that corrupt local officials had motivated the uprising, but the White Lotus Society had ominously named themselves after a secret group that overthrew the emperor centuries before.

This, however, was not the only reason why the White Lotus rebellion deserves notice. Since the rebels were ethnic Chinese, Qing troops found it much more difficult to fight them. Rebels employed guerrilla tactics and would often melt into the populace once they had harassed the imperial troops. After ten years (the rebellion lasted from 1794 to 1804) the emperor's soldiers suppressed the rebellion, but they only did so after killing tens of thousands of rebels and civilians.

The other major rebellions of the nineteenth century reflected overall popular unhappiness with the Qing regime, though more often this unhappiness reflected ethnic tensions within the empire. The Taiping Rebellion (1851–64) took place in the context of famine, but (mostly Chinese) rebels also fought to replace the ruling Mongolian leaders, the Qing, for proper Chinese leaders instead. During the same period as the Taiping Rebellion, the Panthay Rebellion (1858–73) and the Dungan Revolt (1862–77) also began. These revolts were mostly caused by the desire of Muslims in the empire to throw off the yoke of their Chinese (and Mongolian) oppressors. Neither of these rebellions was successful, but it is noteworthy that they took so long to be suppressed.

The people remained generally dissatisfied with the regime, and their frustration would eventually lead them into rebellion again. The Boxer Rebellion, for instance, initially espoused the removal of *all* foreigners from China, including the Qing (since the Qing were initially Mongolian). When the dowager empress, who was effectively in control of the empire, began to direct the rebellion in secret, however, the rebels redirected their hatred towards foreigners from *outside* the empire. The European powers eventually helped to defeat the rebels, but the Qing were near the end of their reign. After the dowager empress died in 1906, control of the empire passed to the two-year-old son of a powerful lord. After five years of internal squabbles for power, a number of provinces opted to secede from the empire in 1911. They declared the creation of the Republic of China, and while they did not control much of China at the time, the quixotic idea of a Chinese republic soon became reality. The empire had come under the control of a much-admired general, Yuan Shikai. Yuan preferred to negotiate with the republicans and their leader, Sun Yat-Sen. The two sides soon agreed that the emperor should abdicate, and in 1912 the Republic of China was born.

Summary

- The Qing Dynasty expanded the borders of China's empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, conquering Tibet, Mongolia, Taiwan, and other outlying areas. Under several long-lived emperors during this period, the Qing Dynasty consolidated its hold on society, improved administration, and led a flowering of cultural initiatives.
- While the early Qing Dynasty had successfully limited interactions with foreign traders, European countries and their trading companies forced their way into the Chinese markets in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Europeans legitimized their status with the so-called Unequal Treaties.
- Internal unrest characterized Qing politics throughout the nineteenth century. The various peoples who lived under the Qing banner sought to throw off the yoke of the foreigners, and the regime became increasingly unable to quell the dissent.