

merchants were formidable agents of conversion. The foundation of a new entrepôt state at Malacca (Islamized by 1425) was the prelude to Islam's rapid spread in maritime South East Asia. Yet perhaps the starkest evidence for Islam's continuing dynamism was the forward movement of Ottoman power in South East Europe. The Ottoman state, the most vigorous of the Turkic principalities in Asia Minor, had crossed the Dardanelles into Europe in the 1350s. Independent Serbia was destroyed at Kosovo in 1389; Bulgaria was in Ottoman hands by 1394. At the Battle of Nicopolis (1396) a pan-European army of would-be crusaders was crushed. Ottoman power was resilient enough to survive defeat at Tamerlane's hands in 1402, and the capture of Constantinople in 1453 marked the consolidation of a new dynastic state militarily more formidable than any the Europeans had so far faced in the East. At the death of Mehmet the Conqueror in 1481, the whole Balkan peninsula south of Belgrade and the Danube estuary was under Ottoman rule. The 'gunpowder age' seemed to be signalling a violent new phase of Islamic expansion.

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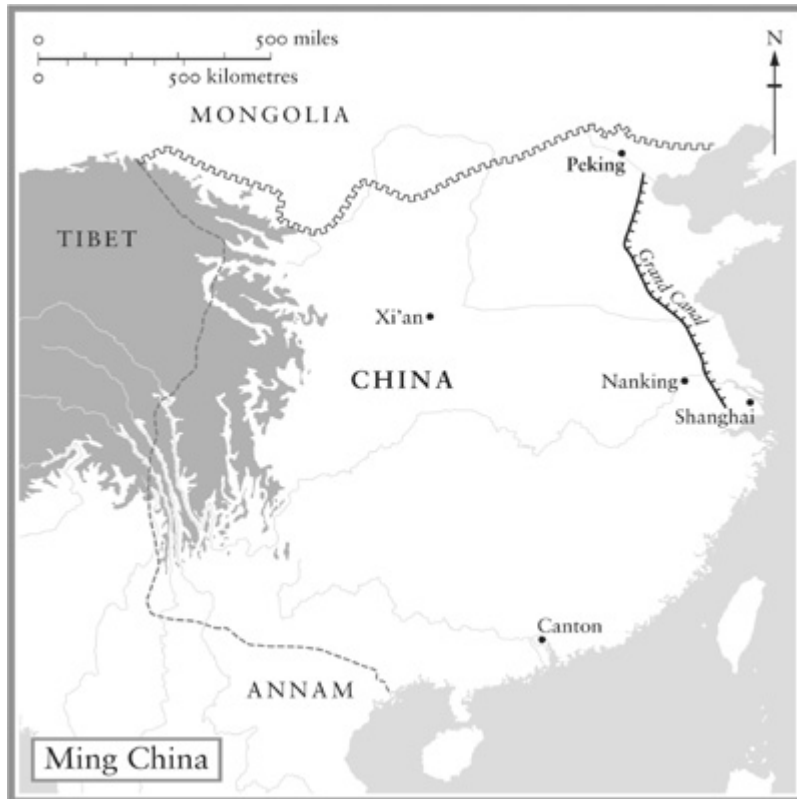
Around 1400, Islamic societies remained the most dynamic and expansionist element in Eurasia. But it was China whose wealth and power were pre-eminent. Despite periodic disruption by dynastic upheaval and external invasion, China displayed a political and cultural cohesion unmatched by Europe or the Islamic world. This cohesion had been severely tested. China, too, had felt the impact of Mongol imperialism. A Mongol dynasty (the Yuan) had imposed its rule for most of the century after 1260. The destructive fallout of the Mongol invasion meant the dislocation of trade, and the effects of disease (the Black Death) may have reduced the population from 100 million to 60 million. The Yuan era can also be seen in a more positive light as continuing the commercial expansion of the previous Sung period, opening China more fully to the trade and culture of Middle Eurasia. And after 1370, under the new Ming

dynasty (whose founder was a Han, or native Chinese), the unity of the Chinese world was restored and strengthened.

The crucial ingredient of that unity could be found perhaps in China's social and cultural origins. China had been 'made' by the cumulative expansion of intensive agriculture from its beginnings in the north-west, where fertile, fine-grained loess soils had been exceptionally favourable to close cultivation. A continuous process of agricultural colonization carried this 'Chinese' culture across the plains of North China, and then to the Yangtze valley and into the south. Here the basis of agriculture changed, from the wheat and millet of the drier north to the growing of wet-field rice. This great southward expansion, absorbing new land and people into the Chinese world, was the crucial stage in the 'making' of China. It added the hugely productive rice-growing region (where double and triple cropping was possible) to the agrarian economy. It brought new crops and commodities from the sub-tropical south to stimulate a rise in domestic trade. 'The north in the past', claimed a contemporary writer, 'profited from dates and millet, neither of which southern China has had at any time. Nowadays, the south enjoys abundant profits from perfumes and teas, neither of which has ever existed in the north. The north benefits from its hares, the south from its fish. None of these things has been possessed by both north and south.'⁴⁶ The southward expansion also encouraged the relatively rapid emergence between 900 and 1300 of a commercial economy whose geographical regions were physically linked by a network of waterways. With these in place, specialization accelerated (because necessities could be brought from some distance away); an elaborate system of credit grew up; and the use of paper money eased the expansion of business. China assembled the basic components of a market economy earlier, and on a much larger scale, than any other part of Eurasia. It reaped the rewards from inter-regional exchange and the impulse this gave to technical change. Before 1300, a range of innovations in both agriculture and manufacture (cotton-textile weaving was by then well established in

the lower Yangtze valley) had been widely adopted, and a culture of invention favoured the diffusion of new techniques.

This remarkable growth path, whose trajectory was quite different from the rest of Eurasia's, shaped China's political as well as economic history. To a much greater extent than anywhere else in Eurasia, the commercial economy that made China so wealthy needed the active support of public authority, mainly to build and maintain the waterways. China's communications, as well as the managing of its fragile environment – dependent on water, threatened by floods – required an unusual degree of bureaucratic liaison between centre, province and district. Secondly, it was brutally clear that without the union of north and south the pattern of regional exchange that drove the commercial economy would function poorly at best. That meant exerting effective control over a much larger land area than any other state in Eurasia was able to rule continuously. Thirdly, it was North China's acquisition of the vast, rich hinterland stretching away to the South China Sea that allowed it to meet its main geopolitical challenge – although not all the time. The Chinese Empire, with its highly evolved agrarian culture, confronted the nomad empires that erupted volcanically in the Inner Asian steppe. Indeed much of North China was dangerously close to the epicentres of nomadic energy – which usually formed where the steppe and the 'sown' came closest together. The primary role of a Chinese emperor was to safeguard the frontier against the nomadic irruptions that threatened to wreck (physically and politically) his complex agrarian world. The resources to pay for this eternal war of attrition against the Inner Asian invader depended heavily on the south's contribution in foodstuffs and trade. Thus,



although China, like much of Middle Eurasia, had felt the violent impact of Mongol imperial ambition, the blow had been softened. The steppe invaders had learned very quickly that they had to maintain the apparatus of imperial rule if they hoped to exploit China's agrarian wealth. They had to become 'Sinicized', corroding as they did so the tribal loyalties on which their power had been built. Mobilizing the south against the alien conqueror made it possible to maintain stable, continuous government far more completely than in Middle Eurasia, where Turkic tribes and military slaves were the main beneficiaries of political change.

But China's cohesion was not simply the consequence of commercial and strategic self-interest. It rested upon the achievement of a remarkable 'high culture', a classical, literary civilization, whose moral and philosophical outlook derived from Confucian texts. Just as critical, perhaps, to the making of China as the junction of its north and south was the entrenchment of this Confucian learning in a literati elite and their recruitment to form an imperial bureaucracy. Once Confucian scholarship and literary

skill (writing the ‘three-legged’ essay required by the civil-service examiners) became the ticket of entry into imperial service, they enjoyed the devotion of the educated class in every part of China. The adoption by the provincial gentry of literati ideals (and bureaucratic ambitions) was a vital stage in China’s transition from a semi-feudal society, where power was wielded by great landholders, into an agrarian empire. What made that possible was an imperial system that relied much less on the coercive power of the imperial centre (a clumsy and costly option in such a large state) than on the *cultural* loyalty of the local elites to an imperial idea with which their own prestige was now closely bound up. As a formula for the exertion of effective power at very long range, it was astonishingly ingenious and astonishingly successful.

It was hardly surprising that the impressive scale of the Chinese state, the wealth of its cities, the skill of its engineers and artisans, the quality of its consumer goods (like silk, tea and porcelain), the sophistication of its art and literature, and the intellectual appeal of its Confucian ideology were widely admired in East and South East Asia. In Korea, Japan and Vietnam (parts of which were ruled as a province of China for over a thousand years until AD 939), China was regarded as the model of cultural achievement and political order. Chinese merchants had also developed an extensive trade, taking their products to South East Asia.⁴⁷ The seafaring and navigational skills of Chinese sailors – including the first use of the magnetic compass – were comparable with, if not superior to, those of their Arab or European counterparts.

Around 1400, it might have seemed to any well-informed observer that China’s pre-eminence in the Old World was not only secure but likely to grow stronger. Under Ming rule, China’s subordination to the Mongols and their imperial ambitions all across Eurasia had been definitively broken. Ming government reinforced the authority of the emperor over his provincial officials. The use of eunuchs at the imperial court was designed to strengthen the emperor against the intrigues of his scholar-gentry advisers (as well as protect the virtue of his concubines). Great efforts were made to improve the

agrarian economy and its waterway network. Then, between 1405 and 1431, the emperors dispatched the eunuch admiral Cheng-ho on seven remarkable voyages into the Indian Ocean to assert China's maritime power. Commanding fleets carrying over twenty thousand men, Cheng-ho cruised as far as Jeddah in the Red Sea and the East African coast, and made China's presence felt in Sri Lanka, whose recalcitrant ruler was carried off to Peking. Before the Europeans had gained the navigational know-how needed to find their way into the South Atlantic (and back), China was poised to assert its maritime supremacy in the eastern seas.

This glittering future was not to be. Instead, the early fifteenth century was to show that, while China was still the most powerful state in the world, it had reached the limits of oceanic ambition. There would be no move beyond the sphere of East Asia until the Ch'ing conquered Inner Asia in the mid eighteenth century. The abrupt abandonment of Cheng-ho's maritime ventures in the 1420s (the 1431 voyage was an afterthought) signalled part of the problem. The Ming had driven the Mongols out, but could not erase the threat that they posed. They were forced to devote more and more resources to their northern defence, a geostrategic burden whose visible part was the drive to complete the so-called Great Wall. Turning their back on a maritime future may have been a concession to their gentry officials (who disliked eunuch influence), but it was also a bow to financial constraints and the supreme priority of dynastic survival. The Ming decision reflected, perhaps, a deeper constraint. The Ming dynastic principle was the fierce rejection of the Inner Asian influence that the Mongol Yuan had wielded. It united China against the cultural outsiders. It asserted the exclusiveness of Chinese culture. A 'Greater China' of Han and non-Han peoples was incompatible with the Ming vision of the Confucian monarchy. The grand strategy of indefinite defence carried with it the logic of cultural closure.⁴⁸

There was a further change, whose effects no contemporary observer could have fully grasped. The greatest puzzle in Chinese history is why the extraordinary dynamism that had created the

largest and richest commercial economy in the world seemed to dribble away after 1400. China's lead in technical ingenuity and in the social innovations required for a market economy was lost. It was not China that accelerated towards, and through, an industrial revolution, but the West. China's economic trajectory has been furiously debated. But the hypothesis advanced by Mark Elvin more than thirty years ago has yet to be overturned.⁴⁹ Elvin stressed the advances achieved by China's 'medieval economic revolution' in the Sung era, but insisted that when China emerged from the economic depression of the early Ming period (a product in part of the great pandemic) a form of technical stagnation had set in. More was produced, more land was cultivated, the population grew. But the impetus behind the technological and organizational innovations of the earlier period had vanished, and was not recovered. China grew quantitatively, not qualitatively. Part of the reason, Elvin argued, was the inward turn we have noticed already: the shrinking of China's external contacts as the Ming abandoned the sea. There was an intellectual shift away from the systematic investigation of the natural world. And it was partly a matter of exhausting the reserves of fresh land, so that less and less was to spare for industrial crops (like cotton) after the needs of subsistence had been met. A subtler influence was also at work. China was a victim of its own success. The very efficiency of its pre-industrial economy discouraged any radical shift in production technique (even in the nineteenth century, the vast web of water routes made railways seem redundant). The local shortages, bottlenecks and blockages that might have driven it forward could be met from the resources of other regions, linked together in China's vast interior market. Pre-industrial China had reached a 'high-level equilibrium', a plateau of economic success. Its misfortune was that there was no incentive to climb any higher: the high-level equilibrium had become a trap.⁵⁰

We should not anticipate too much. It was to be more than three centuries before anyone noticed.

any single factor, but in the remarkable combination of favourable circumstances in the century after 1613: the consolidation of a social order whose savage discipline reflected the mentality of the ‘armed camp’;⁷⁴ its receptiveness to cultural innovation from elsewhere in Europe; Russia’s profitable role as an entrepôt between Europe and the Middle East;⁷⁵ its open land frontier, which helped fuel expansion and lubricate the rise of autocratic power; its pivotal role in ‘steppe diplomacy’; and the geostrategic fortune that allowed the exclusion of its European rivals from the whole of Eurasia north of the Black Sea after 1710. Here was a model of European expansion to set beside that of the maritime West.

RENOVATION IN EAST ASIA

Viewed from the West, the most striking feature of East Asian history was the retreat into seclusion after the upheavals that had convulsed the first half of the seventeenth century. In both China and Japan, the installation of new political regimes led to the search for political and cultural consolidation at home and to the deliberate shrinking of diplomatic and commercial contacts abroad. At first sight, then, a sharp contrast appears between East Asia – drifting into cultural stasis and economic stagnation behind the political barrier of xenophobic diplomacy – and Europe with its cultural openness, vigorous overseas trade and competitive politics. It would be easy to conclude that the check imposed on European expansion by the long economic downswing after 1620 was only a ‘loaded pause’ that concealed the widening gap between a dynamic West and an unprogressive East, trapped in its conservatism and introversion.

Before reaching such a verdict, we need to look carefully at the consequences of the great renovation brought about by the Tokugawa shogunate and the Manchu (or Ch’ing) dynasty. Both created polities that lasted some 250 years. Both presided over a period of rapid population growth, extensive agricultural

colonization, widening internal commerce and rising demand for books. We should react sceptically to grand generalizations about stasis and stagnation. Nor should we be too quick to assume that China's very limited participation in international trade after c.1690 signalled its incorporation into the subordinate 'periphery' of a European 'world system'.⁷⁶ Indeed, closer inspection may suggest that the reconstruction of East Asia after c.1620 played a crucial part in strengthening East Asian civilizations against the full impact of European expansion that was felt across much of the extra-European world after 1750.

The gradual collapse of the Ming dynasty in North China culminated in the seizure of the imperial capital by the Manchus in 1644 and, nominally, the beginning of a new dynastic era – that of the Ch'ing, as the Manchus styled themselves.⁷⁷ But the real founder of the Ch'ing empire was K'ang-hsi (b. 1654, r. 1661–1723), whose long reign had the same importance for consolidating Ch'ing rule as Akbar's had had for the Mughals in India. At K'ang-hsi's accession, the prospects for a stable imperial regime were poor. The Manchus as a ruling elite had not yet made the transition from the clan system characteristic of steppe nomad societies.⁷⁸ The idea of dynastic succession – vital for the continuity of imperial rule – was alien to them. Clan politics meant a continuous competition for power and influence, and a sharing (and resharing) of captured wealth and land among the dominant clans and their leaders. It was profoundly at odds with the Confucian system of empire consolidated in the Han era (206 BC–AD 220) and brought to its autocratic apogee under the Ming. Partly for this reason, large parts of South China, and large segments of the literati elite, remained unreconciled to Manchu authority. It had been this state of affairs, and their original dependence upon ethnic-Chinese allies to overcome Ming resistance, that had forced the Manchus to delegate wide powers to the Chinese generals responsible for subjugating the southern and south-western provinces. Indeed, by the 1670s three of these generals – the so-called 'Three Feudatories' – enjoyed practically complete autonomy from Peking, with the tempting

prospect of establishing their own dynastic claim. To add to this catalogue of difficulties, the Manchus faced new threats to their authority in Inner Asia: from the Kalmyks; from the theocratic empire of the Dalai Lama in Tibet; and, in the region south and east of Lake Baikal, from tsarist officials and Russian fur traders. Meanwhile, on the maritime frontier overlooking the South China Sea, the breakdown of Ming rule and the opportunities created by seaborne trade had spawned the trading and privateering state of the freebooter Koxinga (Cheng Ch'eng-kung), securely based, as it seemed, on the impregnable island of Taiwan.⁷⁹

The most immediate threat to the Manchus' survival was their lack of real control in South China. Anticipating K'ang-hsi's determination to crush them, the Feudatories rebelled openly in 1673–4. General Wu, the most powerful of the three, contemptuously offered the Manchu court a territorial partition that would have left it only Manchuria and Korea.⁸⁰ A more real possibility was the division of China along the Yangtze, denying North China and the imperial government its vital foodbowl, and reducing Peking to a rump state precariously balanced on the flank of Inner Asia. After a prolonged struggle, K'ang-hsi had gained the upper hand by the early 1680s, partly because Wu had died (of dysentery) in 1678⁸¹ and partly, perhaps, because the feudatory generals held little appeal for Ming loyalists in the south and the scholar-gentry preferred imperial continuity, even under the Manchus, to warlord rule. By 1683, too, K'anghsi had finally liquidated Koxinga's rebel state, and the drastic policy of evacuating the coastal belt⁸² (to deny the rebels its resources) that had been pursued for more than twenty years could now be reversed. Foreign trade, closely restricted for the same reason, was opened up once more.⁸³ In the later 1680s, with South China more or less pacified, K'ang-hsi was able to turn to Inner Asia.

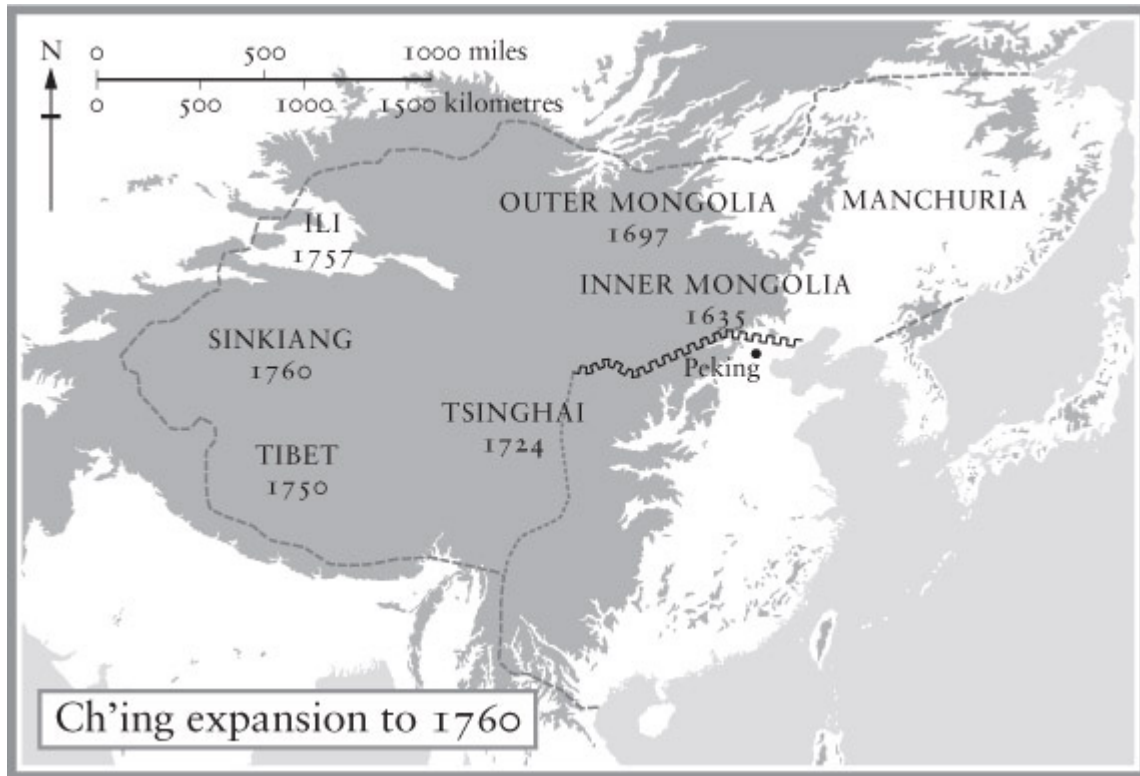
No Manchu emperor was likely to underestimate the danger of a new steppe challenger repeating the Manchu gambit: building a frontier state based on the fusion of steppe and agricultural

economies and strong enough to subvert the loyalty of the ethnic-Chinese population. In the 1670s the Kalmyk (or Oirat) ruler Galdan began to assemble a steppe empire of menacing size. From his original base in Dzungaria, lying west of Mongolia, he conquered the oases and trading cities of eastern Turkestan. In 1688 he invaded Outer Mongolia and threw down the gauntlet to Peking.⁸⁴ At the same time, the Russian presence along the northern edges of Mongolia and in Amuria (north of Manchuria) foreshadowed a profitable alliance between these interlopers in the Chinese realm. Perhaps K'ang-hsi was fortunate that this double Inner Asian challenge came too late to coincide with the struggle inside China proper. But no Chinese emperor could have been better prepared for the mental and physical stress of a frontier war. K'ang-hsi was a passionate hunter, and claimed to have killed over a hundred tigers, dozens of bears and leopards, and nearly a hundred wolves. He regarded the chase as practice for war, and his frequent expeditions to the frontier zone, in search of sport and to visit his troops, gave him first-hand knowledge of the theatre of conflict, and of the tactics and logistics needed for Chinese victory.⁸⁵

Neither the Russians nor the Manchus had at first much idea of each other's strength or objectives. In the mid-1650s, Moscow had begun to grasp that the mysterious eastern potentate 'Prince Bogdoy' was more than just a minor ruler and must be treated with as much respect as the Ottoman, Iranian or Mughal emperor.⁸⁶ The Russians persisted in hoping that the Manchus would agree to diplomatic relations and the opening of trade. There was already a growing Russian commerce with Central Asia and India through Astrakhan at the mouth of the Volga. Embassies had been exchanged regularly with the Kalmyks and Mongols since the 1630s. K'ang-hsi was willing to sidestep the rigid protocol governing Chinese diplomatic relations and meet the tsar's envoys informally; but he was also determined to expel Russian influence from East Asia. In 1684 he warned the Mongols to cease trading with the Russians. In 1685 his army razed Albazin, the most advanced Russian outpost in the Amur valley. The Russians returned, and

Galdan's conquest of Outer Mongolia in 1688 threatened Peking with a long, exhausting frontier war. But the Russo-Kalmyk alliance failed to materialize, and in 1689 at Nerchinsk in south-eastern Siberia K'ang-hsi surrounded the Russian negotiators with a large army and forced them to renounce the whole vast area north of Manchuria – a defeat for Russian expansion that was not reversed until 1860. In 1690, Manchu armies used artillery to defeat Galdan in battle.⁸⁷ Six years later, after a further shattering defeat, Galdan committed suicide. The final consolidation of Chinese overrule in Inner Asia, with the conquest of Sinkiang or East Turkestan, was not completed for some sixty years. But K'ang-hsi had restored Peking's authority in mainland East Asia. This great triumph, followed up by the Yung-cheng (r. 1723–35) and Ch'ien-lung (r. 1735–96) emperors, was the vital geopolitical precondition for the domestic achievements of Ch'ing rule and, in the longer term, for its tenacious resistance to European diplomatic and commercial demands in the nineteenth century.

Indeed, this grand strategic victory opened the way for an exceptionally dynamic period in Chinese history. The Yung-cheng emperor completed the transition from the clannish regime the Manchus had brought with them to a revived and strengthened version of Ming absolutism. The Manchu 'bannermen' – the private princely armies



that had played a key role in the seizure of power – were brought under imperial control or pensioned off.⁸⁸ This averted the threat of factional warfare at times of dynastic succession. A new and more flexible Grand Council supplanted the Grand Secretariat and the censorate as the centre of decision-making.⁸⁹ A third innovation, the ‘palace memorial’ system, encouraged a stream of confidential information about the misdeeds of provincial authorities. Careful renovation of the examination system was part of K’ang-hsi’s reconciliation with the Chinese literati. It was the crucial bond between the imperial centre, the scholar-gentry of the provinces, and the county magistrate (*hsien chih*) whose *yamen* (or office) was the eyes and ears of the imperial government. So long as the scholar-gentry aspired to bureaucratic advancement through the examination system, with its classical syllabus and Confucian ideology, and while China was governed from walled cities with an ultra-loyal Manchu army in reserve, rebellion was unlikely to spread far or last long. The early emperors also insisted upon frugal expenditure to ease the weight of taxation. With large tax surpluses,

and having beaten, cowed or reconciled their enemies, the Ch'ing emperors had found the formula for external security and internal peace.

This was a favourable setting for economic progress and cultural revival. By some estimates, China's population increased threefold between 1723 and 1796 under K'ang-hsi's successors. There was a large increase in the area under cultivation, which may have doubled between 1650 and 1800.⁹⁰ Ethnic Chinese (Han) settlers colonized forested regions in the south and south-west. The state repaired damaged waterways and built new ones.⁹¹ New food crops like maize (brought by the Portuguese) and sweet potatoes (brought to Fukien in the eighteenth century) supplemented rice; and cash crops like tea, indigo and sugar were grown for export, especially in coastal provinces like Fukien and Kwangtung. State officials in the frontier province of Hunan on the middle Yangtze promoted double-cropping with advice, tax incentives and the supply of seed.⁹² Eighteenth-century China saw the end of serfdom, abolished by the Yung-cheng emperor,⁹³ and a new freedom to buy and sell land. The number of market towns rose steadily. In the Kiangnan region on the lower Yangtze, where water communications had favoured the growth of large commercial cities, cotton cloth was manufactured on a large scale by village-based artisans. Shanghai exported textiles to inland regions up to 800 miles away, and iron goods, silk and porcelain were widely traded.⁹⁴ This was a sophisticated mercantile economy in which paper money was supplied by private enterprise and credit was based on the sale of contracts for the future supply of salt to the government – a commodity for which demand was exceptionally stable. China's part in international commerce may have been relatively small, but its internal trade may have been as large, if not larger, than that of contemporary Europe.⁹⁵

But perhaps the most striking feature of Ch'ing rule was that it promoted an exceptionally vigorous phase of cultural renewal. K'anghsi himself liked to converse with the Jesuits at court (their mission had survived the dynastic upheaval). He even learned how

to play the harpsichord. But he rejected the idea of a regular traffic between China and Europe. 'China has no matters of common concern with the West' was his crisp conclusion.⁹⁶ Westerners, like the Jesuits, were welcome to come. But they had to stay and adapt themselves to Confucian ethics: they could not expect to come and go as they pleased. And when the Pope sent a message asking him to send back Europeans suspected by Rome of heresy, K'ang-hsi refused – adding sarcastically that he would cut off their heads and send them instead, so that the Pope could see that they had been 'reformed'.⁹⁷ The Pope's response is not known. K'ang-hsi's main concern was with Chinese culture. He and his successors sponsored the collection and publication of classical literature; K'ang-hsi himself commissioned an encyclopedia. Literacy levels rose, and the volume of printed literature increased to meet the demand.⁹⁸ Novels, poetry, histories, biographies, gazetteers, encyclopedias, anthologies and works of antiquarianism were published. This was a gentry culture that propagated the values and traditions of the Confucian classics: the search for harmony within society and with nature; the importance of hierarchy (especially between generations) and ritual or codes of behaviour for preserving social order and cohesion; the need for self-control and the subordination of personal desires. Through literature and art, and the state's provision of official 'cults' and sacrifices as a focus for local popular religion, the influence of Confucian culture was diffused more widely and deeply than ever before.⁹⁹ China's political and economic integration was thus matched by a growing cultural unity achieved in the last era before the more intense and then violent engagement with the West.

But there were limits to the Ch'ing achievement. Much of China beyond its great system of waterways remained locked in localism – though no more so, perhaps, than large parts of contemporary Europe. More serious was China's notorious failure to revive the naval power renounced some three centuries earlier. Chinese merchants and settlers in South East Asia had no claim on imperial

protection, and savage massacres of Chinese in the Spanish Philippines drew no response from Peking.¹⁰⁰ European fascination with China – however ignorant and ill-informed – had no counterpart in Chinese intellectual circles, a measure perhaps of cultural self-confidence and the prestige of an unbroken classical tradition of exceptional range and subtlety. In some respects eighteenth-century China was turning even more markedly inward: the Yung-cheng emperor reversed in 1727 the limited tolerance granted to Christian missionaries since Mongol times.¹⁰¹ Even when European ideas were imported, they appeared unworkable or irrelevant in the Chinese context.¹⁰² A good example is the idea of perspective in painting. Chinese artistic theory did not ‘fail’ to invent perspective: it rejected as invalid a single fixed perspective, stressing instead the multiplicity of viewpoints from which an object or landscape might be viewed.¹⁰³ But perhaps a deeper problem (from the point of view of technological and scientific change) was the underlying conservatism of Ch’ing society, which vested enormous social power in its bureaucracy and in corporate bodies like guilds and lineage or clan authorities, who played a key role in maintaining a hierarchic social discipline. Ch’ing rule may have added an extra twist to what were, no doubt, entrenched social tendencies. After all, for all its championing of Confucian culture, this was at bottom a ‘Manchu *raj*’ – imperial rule by an alien dynasty and its racial henchmen, who were segregated by residence and marriage laws from the Han majority. Like other colonial regimes in world history, the Manchus found that the price of stability was alliance with those who enjoyed local dominance, and the careful avoidance of social or political risk. Thus the *timing* of Manchu consolidation between 1680 and 1750 was highly significant. On the eve of the close encounter with the West, China’s distinctive political trajectory (still dominated by its symbiotic relationship with Inner Asia) propelled it not towards an all-powerful oriental despotism (imagined by Europeans) – which might have permitted drastic change in the face of external challenge – but instead still further towards a ‘limited *raj*’ in which

central government abandoned almost all initiative to local (and usually conservative) forces. When China's eighteenth-century 'economic miracle' turned sour, the scope for political change was correspondingly narrow.¹⁰⁴

Like China, Japan experienced a remarkable period of political consolidation and economic growth in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. The shogunate, or regency, was made hereditary in the Tokugawa clan. The imperial court, reduced to symbolic importance, remained in the old capital at Kyoto, where the shoguns also maintained a splendid palace for their periodic visits. The key to political stability was the supremacy that the Tokugawa exerted over the clans and clan domains into which Japan was divided, and over the *daimyo*, or nobles, who ruled them. Military dominance was supplemented by the notorious system of *sankin kotai*, which required the *daimyo* to leave their wives and children at the shogunal capital at Edo and to reside there themselves in alternate years. While in Edo, *daimyo* were obliged to attend the shogun's court twice a month, and to perform administrative duties in and around the city. At the same time the hereditary warrior class, the samurai, were gathered in domain castle towns, like Himeji or Nagoya, or attended Edo as retainers of the resident *daimyo*. By degrees, they were transformed into a gentry service class, dependent on their clan stipends and increasingly attracted to the gentlemanly ideals propounded by Confucianism, whose vision of the social order was a useful buttress to their novel status.

Internal peace was accompanied by rapid growth in the population, which increased from 12 million in 1600 to some 31 million by 1721 – a figure half as large again as that of France, Western Europe's demographic giant.¹⁰⁵ There was considerable urbanization, and Edo

(c.1 million), Kyoto (350000) and Osaka (360,000) were all major cities by world standards. In 1700 Edo was twice the size of London.¹⁰⁶ The area under cultivation doubled between 1600 and

European influence. Until the 1830s, they seemed almost invulnerable to European attack. By 1840 that old immunity was dead in the case of China and dying in Japan. Instead, both states came under growing pressure from the Europeans. Britain, Russia and the United States took the lead. They demanded free access to the ports of East Asia, freedom to trade with Chinese and Japanese merchants, and an end to the diplomatic protocols under which Westerners had the status of barbarians, culturally and politically inferior to the Middle Kingdom and Japan. They accompanied these demands by the demonstration and use of military force, and by territorial demands – coastal and modest (though far from trivial) by the maritime British, much larger by continental Russia. Not surprisingly, this traumatic alteration in their international position had far-reaching political, cultural and economic consequences in China and Japan. By 1880, both had undergone a series of internal changes that were revealingly described by their makers as ‘restorations’: the T’ung-chih (‘Union for Order’) restoration in China, the Meiji (‘Enlightened rule’) restoration in Japan.⁷² Both were the result of the convergence of internal stresses and external threat. But, as we shall see, their trajectories were very different, and so was the scale of the transformation they promised.

China was the first to feel the weight of European displeasure. The occasion was the breakdown of the old ‘Canton system’ for China’s trade with Europe. Under this system, Canton was the only port through which the trade – confined to a closely regulated guild of Chinese merchants (the ‘Hong’) – was lawful. Europeans (who were allowed to maintain warehouses – ‘factories’ – on the quay) were forbidden to live permanently in the city, departing for Macao at the close of the trading season. The end of the East India Company monopoly of British trade in 1833, and the rapid increase in the number of ‘free’ British merchants selling opium – almost the only commodity that the Chinese would accept for their tea, apart from silver – brought on a crisis. When the Chinese authorities, alarmed by the flood of opium imports and the outflow of silver (the basis of China’s currency) to pay for them, as well as by the widespread

flouting of the rule that all foreign commerce must pass through Canton, tried to reimpose control, driving away the British official sent to supervise the trade and confiscating contraband opium, the uproar in London led to military action. In February 1841 the Royal Navy arrived off Canton, the Chinese war fleet was destroyed, and an invading force landed in the city. When the Chinese prevaricated, a second force entered the Yangtze delta, occupied Shanghai, smashed a Manchu army, and closed the river and the Grand Canal (the main artery of China's internal trade). By August 1842 the British had arrived at Nanking, the southern capital of the empire, and prepared to attack it. The emperor capitulated, and the first of the 'unequal treaties' was signed.⁷³

Under the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, five 'treaty ports' were opened to Western trade, Hong Kong island was ceded to the British, the Europeans were allowed to station consuls in the open ports, and the old Canton system was replaced by the freedom to trade and the promise that no more than 5 per cent duty would be charged on foreign imports. It was a staggering reversal of the old terms on which China had dealt with the West. But its significance (at this stage) should not be overstated. Irksome as the treaty was to the Chinese authorities, it had certain merits. The foreigners were kept well away from Peking, could not travel freely, and, under the system of consular jurisdiction, would be carefully segregated administratively from the Chinese population.⁷⁴ To a great inland, agrarian empire, the snapping of barbarians on the distant coast was a nuisance to be neutralized by skilful diplomacy.

But the treaty was not the end of the matter. It was followed by continual friction between Chinese and Europeans. By 1854 the British were pressing hard for its revision, to open more ports and allow Europeans to move freely into the interior and widen the scope of their trade. In 1856, the '*Arrow*' incident, when the Chinese seized a ship allegedly flying the British flag, became the excuse for a second round of military coercion. When the Chinese stalled the implementation of a new treaty agreed in 1858, an Anglo-French expedition arrived at Tientsin and marched on Peking,

burning the emperor's summer palace in revenge for their losses. The second great treaty settlement, the Convention of Peking, threw open many more ports, as far north as Tientsin and far up the Yangtze, and gave Europeans (including missionaries) the right to roam in the Chinese interior. Moreover, the old fiction of Chinese diplomatic superiority was to be firmly scotched by forcing the emperor to permit European diplomats to be stationed in Peking. China, it seemed, had been forcibly integrated into the Europeans' international system, on humiliating terms and as a second-rate power, at best.

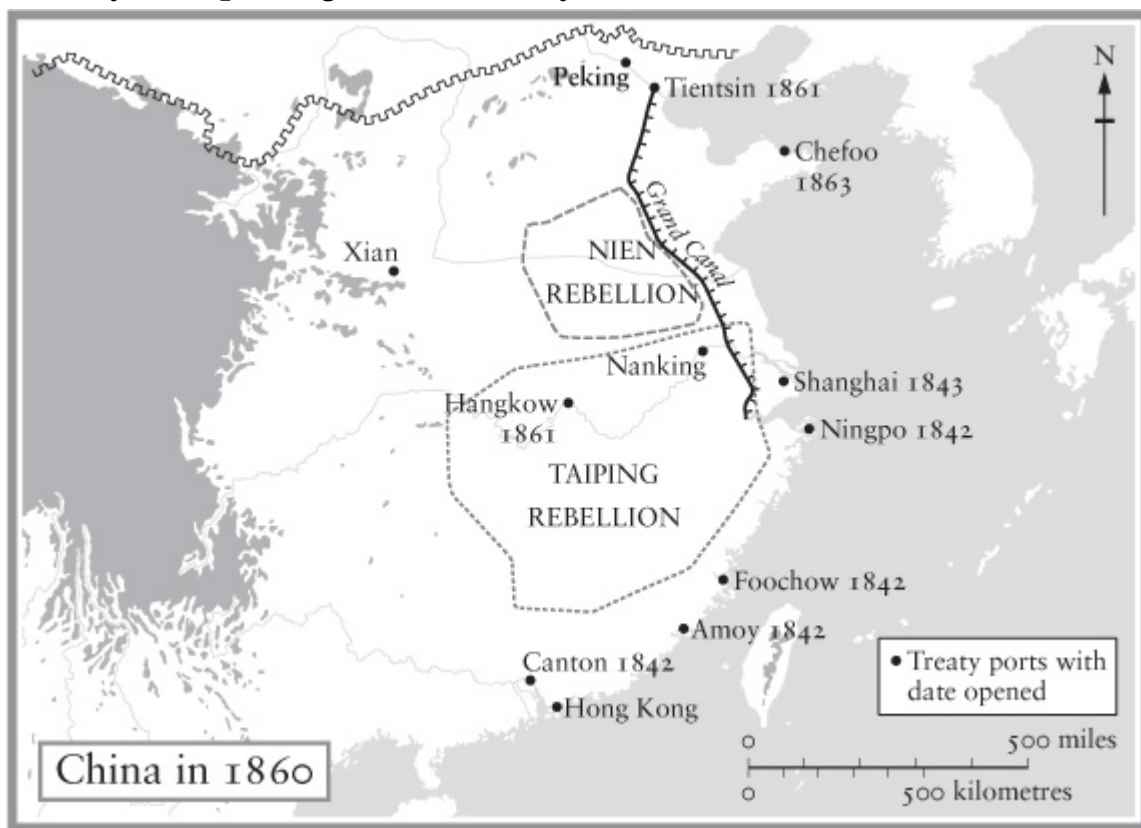
To the more thoughtful of Chinese administrators and scholars (and Chinese officialdom was recruited from the ablest classical scholars), these startling events required explanation. Their conclusions were uncompromising. Their methods had failed: urgent reform was needed. Better ways had to be found to deal with the barbarians. Western knowledge would have to be systematically translated and disseminated. Transport and communications must be improved. Above all, China must acquire the modern weapons needed to prevent the ability of the West to attack the vital points of the empire almost at will. 'We are shamefully humiliated by [Russia, America, France and England],' complained the scholar reformer Feng Kuei-fen (1809–74), 'not because our climate, soil, or resources are inferior to theirs, but because our people are really inferior... Why are they [the Westerners] small and yet strong? Why are we large and yet weak?'⁷⁵ But, by the time that Feng wrote, the empire was beset by an internal crisis that seemed far more dangerous than the spasmodic coercion inflicted by the Europeans. In the 1850s and '60s, huge areas of central and southern China, some of its richest and most productive regions, were in the grip of rebellion, paralysing trade, cutting off the imperial revenue, and portending the withdrawal of the 'mandate of heaven': the source of dynastic legitimacy.

Much the most serious of these great upheavals was the Taiping Rebellion. It began in South West China with the visions of a millenarian prophet, whose preaching combined elements of

Christian teaching picked up from the missionaries with the bitter outcry of peasantry oppressed by economic misfortune. Hung Hsiu-ch'uan declared himself the younger brother of Jesus Christ, and in 1851 proclaimed a new dynasty, the Taiping T'ien-kuo, or Heavenly King dom of Great Peace, with himself as Heavenly King. With astonishing speed, his movement gathered recruits into a peasant army, picked off the isolated garrisons of the Ch'ing government, and swept into the empire's Yangtze heartland. By early 1853 it had captured Nanking. Hung's aim, however, was to replace the dynasty. By 1855 his troops had reached Tientsin and seemed poised to capture the ultimate prize, the imperial capital. This was the high tide. From there his army was forced gradually back to the Yangtze valley, but its eventual defeat was delayed until 1864, with the death of Hung and the fall of Nanking to imperial troops.⁷⁶

The Taiping Rebellion, the great Nien Rebellion that spread across a vast region north of the Yangtze and lasted until 1868,⁷⁷ and the Muslim revolt in the west (1862–73) were symptomatic of a drastic breakdown in the political, social and economic order. This may have had its roots in the plight of the agrarian economy, which was battered by a series of misfortunes after 1830. China had achieved a remarkable growth in agricultural production in the eighteenth century. The clearing of new land, and the more intensive farming of old, had kept food supplies well abreast of a surging population that had reached c. 430million by 1850. Commercialization and the rise of internal trade enabled farmers to increase their output by specialization and exchange. Increasing supplies of silver (as foreign trade expanded) lubricated this prosperous pre-industrial economy with a stream of money.⁷⁸ But well before 1850 these sources of economic expansion had dried up. The inflow of silver was replaced by a massive outflow, as opium imports soared:⁷⁹ perhaps up to half of the silver accumulated since 1700 was lost in a few years after 1820.⁸⁰ The sharp contraction of money supply forced down prices and dried up commerce. The supply of new land could no longer meet the pressure of population. The struggle to extract even more

food from old lands reached its limit and may have triggered an ecological backlash, with deforestation, soil erosion, the silting of rivers and declining fertility. In north-central China, the shift in the course of the Yellow River in 1855 was an environmental disaster on a massive scale. With these multiple setbacks came rising social tension: between tax-collectors and payers; between landlords and tenants; between locals and newcomers in regions where earlier prosperity had drawn in people from elsewhere; between ethnic and religious minorities and the Han majority, who had poured into the western lands in the colonization movement of the previous century. The state officials, who struggled to keep order, collect the land revenue, maintain the waterways and manage the grain reserves, faced increasing resistance from a discontented population. Their authority and prestige had already been



undermined by the 'privatizations' in the era of commercial expansion as licensed merchants took more control over tax-collecting, water conservancy and the grain tribute system – a

change that was readily equated with the growth of bureaucratic corruption. It was no accident that the Taiping programme demanded more land for the peasants, and the return to a more frugal and self-sufficient age. Nor that it denounced the use of opium – a stance that ensured the furious hostility of Western merchants and their governments.

By 1860, then, the scholar-gentry officials who governed the Ch'ing Empire faced disaster. Their prestige and self-confidence were being hammered by the demands of the British, French, Americans and Russians (who had wrung the vast Amur basin out of Peking in the Treaty of Aigun in 1858). Their domestic authority, and the revenue base that sustained the whole superstructure of imperial rule, were imploding as rebellion spread across the eighteen provinces of China proper as well as the outer provinces. In these desperate conditions, their achievements were remarkable. New generals like Tseng Kuo-fan (1811–72) and Li Hung-chang (1823–1901) contained, squeezed and eventually suffocated the great rebellions. They raised new-style armies in the provinces, equipped with Western weapons. They mobilized the provincial gentry, who officered these new regional forces. They levied new taxes on commerce and foreign trade (through the Western-managed Maritime Customs Service). As the rebellions petered out, Tseng and Li looked for ways to 'self-strengthen' China. They encouraged the import of scientific knowledge. Two great arsenals were built to produce modern weapons. Chinese merchants were encouraged with subsidies and monopolies to invest in modern enterprises, especially shipping and mining. There was even an abortive attempt to buy a modern navy in the West, complete with European officers. These 'modernizing' efforts were accompanied in rural China by the drive to resettle land devastated by the rebellions, repair the waterways, and restore the authority of the gentry officials.⁸¹

What this great effort could not achieve (and was not meant to achieve) was the transformation of China into a modern state on the Western model. The limits of Tseng's and Li's 'self-strengthening' were humiliatingly revealed in August 1884, when French warships

blew China's new (but wooden-hulled) fleet to pieces in a quarrel over Vietnam.⁸² Though state-merchant cooperation might have found ways of promoting industrial enterprise, this was a far cry from industrializing the economy more generally. The mid-century combination of agrarian crisis and political upheaval made the task even harder. There was no prospect, for example, of building a new China round the core of its most prosperous region in the Yangtze delta, the heart of its eighteenth-century commercial economy. It had been badly damaged in the Taiping Rebellion, and was too vulnerable to Western penetration to serve this purpose. It might even be argued that the real priority of the 'restoration' was precisely that: to restore the authority of the Confucian state and its ethos of frugality and social discipline, not to break the Confucian mould.⁸³ But if industrial transformation had eluded the scholar-gentry reformers, the importance of their state-building should not be underestimated. Of necessity, the mid-century reforms had devolved considerable power on the provinces and provincial gentry. The recovery programme in the countryside helped to revive the unwritten compact between the peasant and his scholar-gentry rulers. But the gentry were also bound more tightly to the empire by the progressive displacement of the high Manchu officials by ethnic Chinese: with a more unified elite, China was gradually becoming more completely a Chinese state – although recent research suggests that Manchu predominance remained a bone of contention.⁸⁴ China might not have been able to match the industrial output or modern firepower of the European states, but her cultural and social solidarity had been strengthened just in time for the crisis years after 1890.

Nor in the meantime had the European states been able to turn the Middle Kingdom into a mere semi-colonial periphery. The treaty ports had been meant as bridgeheads into the Chinese economy, opening it up Indian-style to Western manufactures. But, though foreign trade expanded (to the considerable benefit of the rural economy), Chinese merchants resisted the entry of foreign business into the domestic economy. Foreigners were forced to deal with

their Chinese customers through a middleman, the comprador.⁸⁵ In a fiercely competitive and uncertain market, there were few easy pickings. The turnover was rapid. By the 1870s, all but two of the largest foreign merchants, Jardine Matheson and Butterfield Swire, had gone to the wall, or made way for new entrants.⁸⁶ Compared with India, China (with twice the population) was a far smaller and more difficult market, consuming only half the level of India's imports. When a crash came in the early 1880s, the commercial eldorado the Europeans had imagined seemed to have vanished almost completely.⁸⁷ But the real test of China's political and economic independence was yet to come.

In the 1850s and '60s there was every reason to think that Japan would suffer the fate of China, in an even more drastic form. Since the early 1800s the gradual opening of the North Pacific had brought more and more shipping to the seas round Japan, from Russia (whose 'Wild East' lay only a few hundred miles to the north), Britain and the United States. In 1853 the Japanese shogun had nervously welcomed the American Commodore Perry, accepting that the era of *sakoku* (seclusion) was over. Five years later, in the 'unequal treaties' of 1858, the main Western powers were granted similar privileges of access to those they had extorted from China in 1842. Foreigners would be free to come and trade in a number of 'treaty ports' (the most important was Yokohama, near Tokyo), where they would remain under the protection of their consuls and be exempt from Japanese jurisdiction. Here land would be set aside for their offices, warehouses and residences. Japan would not be allowed to levy customs duties except at a modest rate, to encourage 'free trade' and the diffusion of Western manufactures. With its old isolation once broken, Japan seemed far more vulnerable to Western domination than its vast continental neighbour on the Asian mainland. Its population (c. 32 million) was much smaller, though far from negligible in European terms. Its main cities were desperately exposed to Western sea power (Japan had no navy). Russians had invaded Sakhalin (their first landing was in 1806) and

UNFINISHED BUSINESS: EAST ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST 1880–1914

By the 1880s, Europeans and Americans had been probing the commercial promise of East Asia for more than a century. They had pushed commercial bridgeheads (the ‘treaty ports’) into China and Japan, and subjected both countries to ‘unequal treaties’ that gave extraterritorial privileges to foreign residents and property. They had enforced a low-tariff regime in the interests of their trade. They had fought two wars against China to assert these rights and extend them more widely. They had forced the Ch’ing emperor to admit the diplomatic equality of the Western states and adopt (in 1876) the European practice of resident ambassadors.¹⁰⁸ But in 1880, despite the scale of the foreign presence, they were far from imposing on China as a whole (let alone on Japan) the kind of colonial subjection – or even semi-colonial dominance – that was fast becoming the rule elsewhere in Afro-Asia.

One reason for this was that East Asia was still comparatively remote from Europe, and the volume of trade between the two regions was considerably less than that between Europe and India (not to mention the Americas). But the Europeans’ caution also reflected China’s huge residual strength as a unified culture and a working political system. The adventurers and filibusters who shot their way into Africa, and carved out private empires with a handful of mercenaries, would have had short shrift in China. The cultural and political fragmentation that made it so easy for European intruders to pick up local allies in Africa had no counterpart here. There was a similar pattern on the commercial front. European merchants in their treaty-port godowns were in no position to control internal trade. They faced a highly organized commercial life, entrenched behind the barriers of language and China’s complicated currency. They were forced by necessity to deal through the large Chinese merchants, who acted as ‘compradors’ (go-betweens) for the Western firms.¹⁰⁹ As late as 1893, this commercial relationship could still be portrayed on the Chinese side

as one of mutual benefit, not foreign exploitation.¹¹⁰ For all its travails in the middle years of the century, the imperial political structure was still in operation under the reformist rule of Li Hung-chang, the most powerful official for most of the period between 1870 and 1900. The ethnic consciousness of the Han majority had yet to be roused fully against the Manchu ruling caste who manned the inner citadel of the Ch'ing regime.¹¹¹ Not least, perhaps, the Ch'ing imperial government, with its tradition of parsimony, had studiously avoided incurring foreign debts, the Trojan Horse of outside interference. By the conciliatory treatment of the foreign enclaves and interests – and allowing expatriate management (under Chinese authority) in the sensitive sphere of maritime customs – Peking hoped to forestall a violent confrontation while China 'self-strengthened'.

Yet Manchu prestige and the stability of Ch'ing rule also depended upon China's central place in the East Asian 'world order'. The Ch'ing's greatest achievement had been to attach the vast Inner Asian hinterland of Tibet, Sinkiang, Mongolia and Manchuria to the East Asian heartland of China proper. Foreign penetration of this imperial periphery threatened to unravel this far-flung network of power. In the 1880s the Europeans chipped away. The Russians pressed forward from Central Asia. The British conquered upper Burma. France forced Peking to abandon its claim to the suzerainty of Annam (much of modern Vietnam). But it was the fate of Korea that brought on the crisis. Korea was vulnerable to external pressure from Russia (which envied its ice-free ports) and Japan. Its Confucian polity had been badly shaken by domestic opponents, some of them Christians. Yet the Peking court could not run the risk that Korea might lean towards another power and cut its long-standing ties with China. The 'hermit kingdom' was the maritime gateway into Inner Asia. It was the springboard for advance into the empty space of Manchuria. Its loss might destabilize much of China's steppe diplomacy, turning Inner Asia into a hostile borderland. So when a Japanese-backed coup overthrew Korea's sinophile regime in 1894, Peking refused to back down. But, in the

short war that followed between July 1894 and March 1895, it was China that suffered a humiliating defeat.

The Treaty of Shimonoseki (in April 1895) unleashed a whirlwind of change. It forced China to recognize the independence of Korea. Part of Manchuria was to be transferred to Japan, as well as Taiwan and the Pescadore islands. China had to pay a huge financial indemnity, equal to a year's worth of its public revenue. Among China's literate class – the provincial scholar-gentry on whose loyalty it depended – the Ch'ing dynasty suffered a devastating loss of prestige. To make matters worse, the imperial government was now forced to borrow abroad to help pay the indemnity and recoup its shattered military strength. Among the European powers, already alarmed by symptoms of impending collapse, this set off a race to lend China money, secured against the collateral of territorial and commercial rights. Russia led the way with a loan in return for Peking's permission to build a railway across Manchuria to its new eastern city at Vladivostok, along with an eighty-year lease to exploit the economic resources found along the line.¹¹² In 1898 Germany, Russia and Britain each acquired a naval base in North China near the maritime approach to Peking. The great powers made agreements among themselves on the zones where they would have preference in the concessions for railways that the Ch'ing government now seemed poised to grant. In this feverish climate, the imperial court suddenly announced a long list of decrees to reform education, the army and the bureaucratic system along lines broadly similar to Meiji Japan. Before they could be implemented, the emperor's mother, the notorious dowager empress (Tz'u-hsi), staged a *coup d'état* and dismissed the reformers. Into the bitter atmosphere of political conflict burst the violent disorders aimed against Christian conversions in north-east China, the Boxer Rebellion of 1898–1900. With the complicity of the court, the Boxers (literally the 'Fists of Righteous Harmony', a fiercely anti-Christian movement) and their sympathizers occupied Peking, cut off the city, and besieged the foreign legations. If the aim was to enlist xenophobic mass feeling in defence of the dynasty (the Boxer

slogan was ‘Support the Ch’ing, exterminate the foreigner’), it backfired spectacularly. The foreign powers (the Europeans, Americans and Japanese) sent a large armed force (45,000 men) to rescue their diplomats and punish the Boxers. It seemed that China’s rulers had blundered willy-nilly into an armed confrontation with the rest of the world.

The outcome inevitably was further humiliation. The dowager empress and her court fled the city. Another huge indemnity was imposed upon China. Under the terms of the Boxer settlement, the Chinese government was also forced to agree tariff reforms that would favour foreign trade. Browbeaten by the ‘diplomatic body’ – the collective weight of the foreign ambassadors – it seemed almost certain that Peking would yield railway concessions that extended foreign control deep into the Chinese interior. At the same time, there was every sign that the invading armies that had suppressed the Boxers would be slow to leave. More than two years later, despite a promise to go, Manchuria was occupied by nearly 150,000 Russian soldiers.¹¹³ The momentum towards an economic share-out, or even a territorial scramble as the other powers reacted to Russia’s aggrandizement, now seemed unstoppable.

Yet China escaped partition and the economic tutelage from which foreign commercial interests had hoped to profit. The reasons were complex. There was, in the first place, almost no chance that the great powers could agree on a share-out in the way they had just done in Africa. The Russians might have liked an empire in North China. But the British, whose commercial interest was much the largest, were determined not to agree on a split. This was partly because of the view in London that there should be ‘no more Indias’ – vast Asian possessions to defend and control – least of all a ‘second India’ with a Russian army on its doorstep.¹¹⁴ That the Boxer crisis coincided with Britain’s embarrassing difficulty in defeating the Boers, and growing war-weariness in public opinion at home, would have made any such scheme a form of political suicide. An undivided China, with a compliant government, was a much better prospect for both trade and investment. So the British and

Americans (whose outlook was similar) encouraged Japan to oppose Russia's forward movement, and in 1902 the British concluded a regional pact, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, promising military (i.e. naval) support if Japan came to blows with more than one great power – that is, if France, Russia's ally, were to enter the fray.¹¹⁵ Neither France nor Germany, the remaining great powers with an interest in China, had sufficient incentive or adequate means to try to enforce a partition against London and Washington.

But it was not merely a question of what the imperialists wanted. Just as important was the tenacious resistance shown by the Chinese. It had always been difficult to break down the cohesion of Chinese authority, resting as it did on the self-interested loyalty of the scholar-gentry class to the dynastic regime that gave it employment. It might have been expected that the sequence of disasters since 1894–5 would have weakened the Ch'ing claim to the 'mandate of heaven'. And so it did. But the paradoxical result was a new political atmosphere much more fervently hostile to foreign interference. The 1890s had seen the rapid growth of a political movement that rejected the idea that Chinese unity depended on dynastic rule. Sun Yat-sen and his followers insisted that China was the nation state of the Han (Chinesespeaking) people and could be governed only by their chosen leaders.¹¹⁶ The Ch'ing or Manchu dynasty was an alien tyranny.¹¹⁷ Nor was Sun's nationalism the only form of Chinese political militancy. The newcommercial life around the treaty-port towns created fresh social forms. Associations sprang up to serve the newurban middle class self-consciously creating a 'modern' Chinese society.¹¹⁸ Treaty-port industrialization produced a Chinese working class, a popular mass that could be used to intimidate foreign interests and enclaves. The provincial gentry, who had enjoyed increasing autonomy since the Taiping Rebellion, took over the role of defending China against the foreign threat from what increasingly seemed a corrupt and impotent dynasty. When Peking resumed the path of reform after the Boxer crisis, it played into their hands. The newarmy (modelled on those of Europe

and Japan), the new bureaucracy, the newschools and colleges, and the abolition (in 1905) of the age-old examination system with its Confucian syllabus broke what remained of the old bonds of loyalty between the scholar-gentry class and the imperial centre. In the provinces, the scholar-gentry officials blocked every effort to use the railway concessions to extend foreign influence. 'Railways are making no progress in China,' the *Times* correspondent told his foreign editor.¹¹⁹ To British financiers, like Charles Addis of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, the Chinese demand for 'rights recovery' meant that, while foreigners could invest in the building of railways, they could not hope to control them.¹²⁰ When the Peking government, in a desperate effort to restore its dissolving authority and bolster its finances, proposed to take the new railways away from the provincial authorities (an imperial edict in May 1911 'nationalized' all trunk lines),¹²¹ it triggered a revolt that brought down the dynasty. The end of Ch'ing rule in 1911 opened four decades of turmoil for the Chinese people. But it also signalled the end of the era when China's subjection to a *Eurocentric* world system might have been possible.

Japan had played a crucial role in checking the advance of European influence in East Asia after 1890. Ironically, it had been Japanese victory in the war of 1894–5 that had set off the race for bases and concessions among the European powers. But Japan did not play the part of 'little brother' to the Western imperialists. Japanese opinion remained deeply suspicious of European intentions, and deeply fearful of a combined Euro-American assault on Japan's precarious autonomy. The Europeans, remarked Ito Hirobumi on his 1882 tour of inquiry into Western constitutionalism, 'help and love their kith and kin and seek gradually to exterminate those who are remote and unrelated... The situation in the East is as fragile as a tower built of eggs... We have to do our utmost to strengthen and enlarge our armament.'¹²² In *Datsua-ron* ('Leave Asia, enter Europe') (1885), the great prophet of modernization Yukichi Fukuzawa equated Asia with backwardness.