
CHINA

A NEW HISTORY

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Early Modernization and the Decline of Qing Power

Self-Strengthening and Its Failure

During the decades following the Qing Restoration of the 1860s, leading personalities, both Manchu and Chinese, tried to adapt Western devices and institutions. This movement, studied by Albert Feuerwerker, Kwang-Ching Liu and others, was posited on the attractive though misleading doctrine of “Chinese learning as the fundamental structure, Western learning for practical use”—as though Western arms, steamships, science, and technology could somehow be utilized to preserve Confucian values. In retrospect we can see that gunboats and steel mills bring their own philosophy with them. But the generation of 1860–1900 clung to the shibboleth that China could leap halfway into modern times, like leaping halfway across a river in flood.

Under the classical and therefore nonforeign slogan of “self-strengthening,” Chinese leaders began the adoption of Western arms and machines, only to find themselves sucked into an inexorable process in which one borrowing led to another, from machinery to technology, from science to all learning, from acceptance of new ideas to change of institutions, eventually from constitutional reform to republican revolution. The fallacy of halfway Westernization, in tools but not in values, was in fact apparent to many conservative scholars, who therefore chose the alternative of opposing all things Western.

The leaders in self-strengthening were those who had crushed the Taipings, scholar-officials like Zeng Guofan and his younger coadjutor, Li Hongzhang (1823–1901), who set up an arsenal at Shanghai to make guns and gunboats. As early as 1864 Li explained to Beijing that the foreigners’ domination of China was based on the superiority of their

weapons, that it was hopeless to try to drive them out, and that Chinese society therefore faced the greatest crisis since its unification under the First Emperor in 221 BC. Li concluded that in order to strengthen herself China must learn to use Western machinery, which implied also the training of Chinese personnel. This simple line of reasoning had been immediately self-evident to the fighting men of Japan after Perry's arrival in 1853. But the movement for Westernization in China was obstructed at every turn by the ignorance and prejudice of the Confucian literati. This lack of responsiveness in China, during the decades when Japan was being rapidly modernized, provides one of the great contrasts of history.

China's difficulties were repeatedly illustrated. To make Western learning available, for example, some eighty Jesuit missionaries during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had produced Chinese translations of over 400 Western works, more than half on Christianity and about a third in science. Protestant missionaries of the early nineteenth century published about 800 items, but nearly all as religious tracts or translations of scripture, mainly directed in simple parlance at the common man, not the Chinese literati. At the Shanghai arsenal during the last third of the century, one gifted Englishman (John Fryer) collaborated with Chinese scholars to translate more than a hundred works on science and technology, developing the necessary terminology in Chinese as they went along. But the distribution of all these works was limited, rather few Chinese scholars seem to have read them, and their production depended on the initiative of foreigners or of a few officials concerned with foreign affairs, not under guidance from the throne.

At the capital an interpreters' college had been set up in 1862 as a government institution to prepare young men for diplomatic negotiation. With an American missionary as head and nine foreign professors and with Robert Hart's prompting and Customs support, this new college soon had over 100 Manchu and Chinese students of foreign languages. Yet antiforeign literati objected to the teaching of Western subjects. The erroneous excuse had to be offered that "Western sciences borrowed their roots from ancient Chinese mathematics . . . China invented the method, Westerners adopted it."

The jealousy of a scholar class whose fortunes were tied to Chinese learning was most vigorously illustrated in the case of a Chinese student, Yung Wing, who had been taken to the United States by missionaries in 1847 and graduated from Yale in 1854. When he returned to China after eight years abroad, he had to wait almost a decade before he was

used by Zeng Guofan as an agent to buy machinery and as an interpreter and translator. Yung Wing's proposal to send Chinese students abroad was not acted upon until fifteen years after his return. In 1872 he headed an educational mission that brought some 120 long-gowned Chinese students to Hartford, Connecticut. Old-style Chinese teachers came with them to prepare these prospective Westernizers of China for the examinations in the classics, a preparation still essential to their becoming officials. Yung Wing was also given as colleague an obscurantist scholar whose mission was to see to it that Western contact did not undermine the students' Confucian morals. In 1881 the whole project was abandoned.

Similar attitudes handicapped early industrialization. Conservatives feared that mines, railroads, and telegraph lines would upset the harmony between man and nature (*fengshui*) and create all sorts of problems—by disturbing the imperial ancestors, by assembling unruly crowds of miners, by throwing boatmen and carters out of work, by absorbing government revenues, by creating a dependence on foreign machines and technicians. Even when modernizers could overcome such fears, they still faced enormous practical difficulties such as the lack of entrepreneurial skills and capital. Major projects had to be sponsored by high officials, usually under the formula of "official supervision and merchant operation." This meant in practice that enterprises were hamstrung by bureaucratism. Merchant managers remained under the thumb of their official patrons. Both groups milked the new companies of their current profits instead of reinvesting them. An ongoing process of self-sustaining industrial growth through reinvestment was never achieved.

Thus, China's late-nineteenth-century industrialization proved generally abortive in spite of the early promise of many officially sponsored projects. For example, the China Merchants' Steam Navigation Company founded by Li in 1872 was subsidized to carry the tribute rice from the Yangzi delta to feed the capital. Almost every year since 1415 long flotillas of grain junks had moved these shipments up the Grand Canal. Now they could go quickly by sea from Shanghai to Tianjin. To provide coal for the steamer fleet the Kaiping coal mines were opened north of Tianjin in 1878. To transport this coal, China's first permanent railway was inaugurated in 1881. Yet by the end of the century these mutually supporting enterprises had made little progress. The China Merchants' Company, plundered by its patrons, managers, and employees, lost ground to British steamship lines. The Kaiping mines, heavily in debt to

foreigners, were taken over by Herbert Hoover and others in 1900. Railroad building was neglected by China and promoted by the imperialist powers in their spheres of influence after 1898.

During the latter part of Li Hongzhang's thirty years of service as governor-general at Tianjin, his chief rival was Zhang Zhidong, who served eighteen years at Wuhan. There he set up an iron foundry that became a steel mill, as well as military academies and technical schools for telegraphy, mining, railways, and industrial arts. Yet Zhang's primary hope was to fit all this technology into the classical Confucian scheme of things.

The modernization of China thus became a game played by a few high officials who realized its necessity and tried to raise funds, find personnel, and set up projects in a generally lethargic if not unfriendly environment. Hope of personal profit and power led them on, but the Empress Dowager's court, unlike the Meiji Emperor's in Japan, gave them no firm or consistent backing. She, on the contrary, let the ideological conservatives stalemate the innovators so that she could hold the balance. Since South China was as usual full of bright spirits looking for new opportunities, especially in the rapidly growing treaty-port cities, the late nineteenth century was a time of much pioneering but little basic change. Westernization was left to the efforts of a few high provincial officials partly because this suited the central–local balance of power—the court could avoid the cost and responsibility—and partly because treaty-port officials in contact with foreigners were the only ones who could see the opportunities and get foreign help.

The payoff from self-strengthening came in the Sino–Japanese War of 1894–1895. Because of her size, the betting was on China, but Li Hongzhang knew differently and tried to forestall the war. China had begun navy building in the 1870s. During the 1880s Li purchased steel cruisers and got instructors and advisors from Britain, but later Krupp outbid Armstrong and two bigger German vessels were added. In the late 1880s, however, funds for the Chinese navy were scandalously diverted by a high-level official conspiracy to build the Empress Dowager's new summer palace instead. By Hart's estimate, the navy "ought to have a balance of 36,000,000 taels [say U.S. \$50 million], and lo! it has not a penny." In September 1894 he found "they have no *shells* for the Krupp's, and no *powder* for the Armstrong's." In the war with Japan, only Li Hongzhang's North China army and fleet were involved (not those in Central and South China), and some of the navy's shells were found to be full of sand instead of gunpowder.

When the Japanese intervened in Korea in 1894, ostensibly to quell Korean rebels, they routed Li's North China army, and in one of the first modern naval battles, off the Yalu River, sank or routed his fleet. It was commanded by an old cavalry general who brought his ships out line abreast like a cavalry charge, while the Japanese in two columns circled around them. Today when tourists visit the marble boat which stands in the Summer Palace lake outside Beijing, they should be able to imagine a caption on it: "In memoriam: here lies what might have been the late Qing navy."

From our perspective today, the startling thing is that China's first modern war should have been left on the shoulders of a provincial official as though it were simply a matter of his defending his share of the frontier. The Manchu dynasty has of course been blamed for its non-nationalistic ineptitude, but the trouble was deeper than the dynasty's being non-Chinese; the fault evidently lay in the imperial monarchy itself, the superficiality of its administration, its constitutional inability to be a modern central government.

The Qing dynasty had survived rebellions of the Chinese people, but its foreign relations now got out of hand. Japan's victory over China threw the Far East into a decade of imperialist rivalries. In order to pay off the indemnity, China went into debt to European bondholders. In 1898 Russia, Germany, Britain, Japan, and France all occupied or claimed spheres of influence in China. These consisted usually of a major port as a naval base, a railway through its hinterland, and mines to develop along it. In order to check Japan, China invited Russia into Manchuria—until the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 left Russia confined to the north and Japan triumphant in South Manchuria and Korea.

All in all, China seemed about to perish. Could a new generation with a new teaching come to the rescue? Could the new teaching inspire a national regeneration under a strong ruling power?

The Christian–Confucian Struggle

To most Chinese, Christian missionaries seemed to be the ideological arm of foreign aggression. The conflict, begun in the seventeenth century and resumed in the nineteenth, went on at many levels: political, intellectual, and social.

Politically, Christianity was heterodox. At first it had seemed to be merely another sect of a Buddhist type, with a belief system, a savior, moral guilt, and a way to atone for it—elements that most religions have

in common. Since most religious sects in China had long since been proscribed, like the White Lotus, they generally had to be secret organizations. After the spectacular Jesuit contact of the 1600s foundered upon the Rites Controversy that pitted the Pope at Rome against the Emperor of China, Christianity was banned in 1724. The ban was not lifted until 1846 at French insistence. Meanwhile the Chinese Roman Catholic communities had survived, but foreign priests had to work clandestinely.

Protestant missionaries by their calling were reformers at heart, and their efforts at once brought them into conflict with the Confucian establishment, which believed in its own kind of reform. Missionaries and the Chinese gentry-elite were natural rivals. Both were privileged, immune to the magistrate's coercion. Both were teachers of a cosmic doctrine. Rivalry was unavoidable. Paul Cohen quotes as representative an early missionary who saw behind the outward show of the Confucian elite's politeness and refinement "nothing but cunning, ignorance, rudeness, vulgarity, arrogant assumption and inveterate hatred of everything foreign." This view was reciprocated. To the scholar-gentry, missionaries were foreign subversives, whose immoral conduct and teachings were backed by gunboats. Conservative patriots hated and feared these alien intruders, but the conservatives lost out as modern times unfolded, and much of the record thus far available is polemical or else comes mainly from the victorious missionaries and Chinese Christians. The record so ably summarized by Cohen (in *CHOC* 10) shows few Chinese converts to the Christian faith but a pervasive influence from missionary aggressiveness.

The period from 1860 to 1900 saw the gradual spread of mission stations into every province under the treaty right of extraterritoriality, and also under the right of inland residence illegally slipped into one treaty by a devout French interpreter. Building on its old foundations, the Roman Catholic establishment totaled by 1894 some 750 European missionaries, 400 native priests, and over half a million communicants. Protestant missions had begun at Guangzhou, where Robert Morrison was employed by the British East India Company after 1807. The first Americans arrived in 1830. By 1894 the Protestant mission effort supported over 1,300 missionaries, mainly British, American, and Canadian, and maintained some 500 stations—each with a church, residences, street chapels, usually a small school, and possibly a hospital or dispensary—in about 350 different cities and towns. Yet they had made fewer than 60,000 Christian converts among the Chinese. Plainly, China was not destined to become a Christian nation.

After 1860 the increase of contact led to continuing friction between gentry and missionaries. Especially among Hunanese who had resisted the “Christian” Taipings, a militant anti-Christian movement organized ideological defenses and fomented violent action. Typically, gentry would spread rumors of missionary immorality when men and women worshipped together. A lurid pornographic literature, revived from the seventeenth century, described the bestial orgies of priests, nuns, and converts. Gentry had only to post placards stating a time and place for the populace to assemble to touch off a riot. Thousands of incidents occurred and hundreds were reported in diplomatic channels by missionaries demanding redress and official protection of their treaty right to proselytize.

Gunboat blackmail obliged Qing officials to take the foreigners’ side and enforce the treaties, further damaging the dynasty’s prestige. The Catholics in particular supported their converts in lawsuits. Having little trade, the French championed Catholic missions, whose bishops claimed and sometimes received a sort of official status.

On their part, the Protestant missionaries, organized under a dozen denominations, had an early struggle to master the Chinese language and work out the terminology they needed to convey their message. China had a full vocabulary already in place to designate God, the soul, sin, repentance, and salvation. Missionary translators were up against it: If they used the established term, usually from Buddhism, they could not make Christianity distinctive. But if they used a neologism, they could be less easily understood. This problem became most acute at the central point in Christianity, the term for God. After much altercation, the Catholics ended up with Lord of Heaven, some Protestants with Lord on High, and others with Divine Spirit. One translation into Chinese of the Bible produced a stalemate in which the missionaries could not agree on what to call the basic kingpost of their religion.

In the “Christian occupation of China,” as it was unwisely called, Protestant missionaries brought their small schools and rudimentary medicine into the major cities, where examination candidates could occasionally be leafletted. But for the most part the Americans, who had usually come from farms, found that life in the countryside was more congenial and offered a better prospect of competing with Confucianism. The growth of the Protestant Christian church was slow but steady. The number of Chinese converts and practicing Christians rose by 1900 to over 100,000, a mere drop in the Chinese bucket, but the Protestant missionaries were great institution-builders. They set up their com-

pounds with foreign-style houses managed by Chinese servants and soon were developing schools and dispensaries or public-health clinics. The first Chinese they won for Christ were often clients or coworkers, like the cook or the tract distributor, but they also included some gifted and idealistic men who were impressed by foreign ways and were willing to embrace the foreign religion. In the late nineteenth century many Chinese reformers took on Christianity partly because the trinity of industry, Christianity, and democracy seemed to be the secret of Western power and the best way to save China.

The Reform Movement

In Late Imperial China trends in Chinese scholarship took a long time to catch up with the trends in China's foreign relations. During the same years as China's widespread commercial growth, there was a movement in scholarship that Benjamin Elman (1984) calls "from philosophy to philology." The essence was that Confucian scholar-officials' concern to make moral judgments in terms of great principles gave way to more precise technical studies that were less culture-bound, and perhaps better preparation for confronting specific modern problems.

The Lower Yangzi delta where so much of the new interregional trade centered in the late eighteenth century was in the same period the home of a new type of scholarship known as "evidential research" (*kaozhengxue*). Chinese dismay at the Ming collapse in the early 1600s had pinpointed the cause in Neo-Confucian philosophy, with its subtle admixture of Buddhist-Daoist abstractions. Scholars were "dissatisfied with the empirically unverifiable ideas that had pervaded" Song and Ming interpretations of Confucianism. The stress on moral principles (Song Neo-Confucianism was known as *Lixue*, "the learning of principle") had contributed to the righteous moral denunciations among factions that had hamstrung late Ming administrations. Under the Manchus, some classical scholars therefore turned from philosophy to philology, and also to mathematical astronomy, specifically to the concrete analysis of texts, their authenticity, interpolations, and exact meanings. One result was that from internal evidence forgeries were discovered in venerated classics. They were no longer sacrosanct.

This new look in Qing scholarship was commemorated in 1829 in a collection of 180 works by 75 seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors, half of whom had held the top degree of *jinsshi*. It happened, ironically, that this great achievement of scholarship was due to the editorial

leadership of the eminent bibliophile Ruan Yuan, who was also the emperor's top official in charge of Guangdong province and the European trade.

It is true of course that many authors in Ruan Yuan's great collection had come from merchant families. The legendary wealth of the Yangzhou salt merchants, for example, enabled them to finance academies and support talent. With the patronage of high officials, scholars were mobilized to work on big imperial projects of compilation such as the *Ming History* and the Qing geographical gazetteer. There were more than 150 such imperial projects. Out of all this work emerged a sense that evidential research was indeed a profession, separate from office-holding.

Academies and their libraries to foster this research proliferated especially in the Lower Yangzi provinces. Though at first stand-offish, the emperor after 1733 began to sponsor academies that prepared students for the examinations. After 1750, however, officially sponsored but internally somewhat autonomous academies emerged to support study, discussion, and research alone. The "Han learning" of evidential research, basing itself on the New Texts of the Han period, showed the intellectual capacity and vitality of an established community of Qing scholars. They communicated partly by letters written for eventual publication. Their achievements in critical evaluation of the inherited texts led them into epigraphy, phonology, and a beginning of archaeological analysis of bronzes and stone monuments.

By the 1840s the sudden triumph of British seapower led to the drawing together of two lines of Chinese reformist thought—the New Text movement to reappraise the classics and the statecraft movement for the scholar-official elite to become more involved and more effective in administration. The scholar-official Wei Yuan (1794–1857) was a leader in both. In 1826 he had compiled over 2,000 exemplary writings on fiscal and other practical aspects of administration. He proposed carrying Beijing's rice stipend from the Lower Yangzi by sea around Shandong instead of over the toilsome Grand Canal route. He helped reform the salt gabelle, wrote an account of the ten successful Qing military campaigns, and at Guangzhou helped Commissioner Lin by compiling an influential account of the countries overseas—altogether a critical new look at China's problems, none too soon. Wei Yuan brought the outside world that Britain represented onto the horizon of the late Qing reformers.

The continuity between evidential research and modern Chinese

scholarship would be evidenced in the 1890s when scholars versed in bronze and stone inscriptions recognized the significance of the “oracle bones” left from the Shang dynasty. This marked the start of modern Chinese archaeology, as noted in Chapter 1, though it did little to help the late Qing meet the Western invasion.

By the 1890s the growth of cities, most of which were treaty ports, had brought great material and social changes. In the coastal and riverine ports, Western-style buildings, street patterns, and city services of gas lighting and water supply, plus steamship transportation and foreign trade, were all connected with (or extensions of) the world outside China. In these ports a modern Chinese economy took shape as a joint product of foreign and Chinese enterprise in commerce, banking, and industry. Simultaneously appeared the modern mass media—Chinese journalists, newspapers, and magazines—and a new intelligentsia of writers and artists not oriented toward careers as government officials. In the modern cities under foreign administration, where Chinese businessmen prospered as bankers and compradors assisting foreign firms, as well as independently, a Chinese public opinion began to find expression.

As Christian converts began to form a decentralized community, missionaries began to put out a Chinese magazine, the *Review of the Times* (*Wanguo gongbao*), which reported on the international scene. Weekly from 1875 to 1883 and monthly from 1889 to 1907 this journal spread world news to the Chinese scholar class. Partly because it was so ably written in classical Chinese by the Chinese editors, the journal being first in the field gave the missionaries a direct channel to the scholars and officials who were grappling with the problems of the outside world. In the 1890s the ablest missionaries (like the Welshman Timothy Richard) pursued a program of reaching the scholar class and so had influence on the reform movement.

From China’s perspective, Japan’s victory of 1895 was not merely a defeat of China by some other civilized power but a real subjection to the powers of darkness represented by the West. Consider that the Westerners had the morals of animals, men and women both holding hands and actually kissing in public. By inventing powerful machines this outside world had overwhelmed the order of man and nature that had created civilization and the good life. Chaos was at hand.

In 1895 several factors had suddenly converged. First was the foreign menace, which had produced four wars and four defeats for China through naval firepower on the coast. New weapons of war, incredibly

destructive, were now wielded by these outsiders. To this fact of foreign power was added the second undeniable fact of foreign skill, not only at war-making but in all the practical arts and technology of life. The steam engine on ships and railroads had sped up transportation beyond all compare, and paved roads, gas lighting, water supply, and police systems now characterized port cities such as Shanghai. Third, to those people who felt that technology and the arts were an expression of basic moral and intellectual qualities, it was plain that traditional China was somehow lacking in these capacities that the foreigner demonstrated.

The crisis and humiliation produced by these considerations led to the inescapable conclusion that China must make great changes. Because China's common people did not contribute to the government and most of the elite were too well ensconced in habitual ways to provide intellectual leadership, only scholars could tackle this problem.

The list of desirable reforms had been steadily growing since the Opium War. Several secretaries and advisors of Li Hongzhang had contributed; so had Christian missionaries, Taiping rebels, diplomats who went abroad, and early Chinese journalists in Hong Kong and Shanghai. For such people the Western countries and now Japan offered a cornucopia of new ways that might be adapted to China's needs. On the broadest level, parliaments could create a firmer bond between ruler and people. Government patents or rewards could encourage inventions, repair of roads could help trade, mineralogy could improve mining, agricultural schools could increase production, translations could broaden education—the list was endless.

However, before the reform movement could gain broad support, a philosophical sanction had to be found for China's borrowing from abroad and changing the old ways. This sanction had to be found within Confucianism, for it was still the vital faith of China's ruling class. It called for statesmanship in the service of the Son of Heaven. Only an insider, a latter-day sage, could perform the intellectual task of updating this Confucian tradition. This was Kang Youwei's great contribution. He was a precocious scholar from Guangzhou, imaginative, sublimely self-confident, and expert at finding in China's classical tradition the precedents that would justify its adaptation to the present.

Kang's starting point was the New Text movement, in which Qing scholars had attacked the authenticity of the Ancient Text versions of the classics upon which the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy since the Song period had been based. The whole subject was at a level of complexity like that of the Christian doctrines of the Trinity or of predestination.

No slick summary can do it justice. But for us today the point is that the New Text versions came from the Earlier Han (BC), while the Ancient Text version had become the standard in the Later Han (AD) and had remained so for the Song philosophers who put together the synthesis we call Neo-Confucianism (in Chinese parlance the Song Learning). To repudiate the Ancient Text versions in favor of the New Text versions (which were really older) gave one a chance to escape the Neo-Confucian stranglehold and reinterpret the tradition. The New Text school of thought believed in adapting institutions to the times and so generally favored reform.

As Benjamin Elman (1990) has shown, the New Text reform movement in late Qing was actually a continuation of the late Ming effort of Lower Yangzi scholars (of the Donglin or “Eastern Forest” academy) to extirpate imperial despotism. Instead of an evil eunuch as in the 1620s, the symbol of the autocracy’s moral iniquity in the 1790s was the aged Qianlong Emperor’s corrupt favorite, Heshen. Beginning in the same Lower Yangzi region as the Donglin (Changzhou prefecture), New Text reformers during the nineteenth century demanded, often in their memorials of remonstrance (*qingyi*), a greater imperial concern for public needs. Kang Youwei, consciously or not, represented a growing gentry interest in government reform.

In 1891 he published his *Study of the Classics Forged during the Xin Period* (AD 9–23). He asserted that “the Classics honored and expounded by the Song scholars are for the most part forged and not those of Confucius.” This bombshell was eruditely crafted and very persuasive (though not then nor now generally accepted). Kang also cited New Text classical sources to buttress his theory of the three ages of (1) disorder, (2) approaching peace and small tranquility, and (3) universal peace and great unity. The world was now entering the second age in this progression, which implied a doctrine of progress. Kang Youwei had secured most of his ideas from earlier writers, but he marched to his own drummer. This enabled him to smuggle the ideas of evolution and progress into China’s classical tradition at the very moment when these ideas were sweeping the international world.

Indeed, Kang Youwei and his best student, the Cantonese Liang Qichao, were quick to accept the Social Darwinism of the 1890s. They wrote books on the sad fate of hidebound nations like Turkey and India and the success stories of Peter the Great’s Russia and Meiji Japan in the struggle for survival of the fittest among nations. In short, these radical

reformers at heart were ardent nationalists but still hoped that the Qing monarchy could lead China to salvation. Profiting from the example of Protestant missionaries, they began to use the modern devices of the press and of study societies that sponsored discussion of public problems both in print and in group meetings. Kang even advocated making worship of Confucius into an organized national religion. But his main hope was a traditional one: to gain the ear of the ruler and reform China from the top down. His chance came in 1898, when each imperialist power demanded a sphere of influence and China seemed about to be carved into pieces. Since 1889 the idealistic Emperor Guangxu had been allowed nominally to reign while his aunt, the Empress Dowager, kept watch on him from her newly refurbished summer palace. The emperor, now twenty-seven, had been reading books, not a safe activity for a figurehead, and his old imperial tutor, a rival of Li Hongzhang, recommended Kang Youwei to him. As the crisis deepened in 1898 the emperor gave him his confidence.

Between June 11 and September 21, during one hundred days, Guangxu issued some 40 reform decrees aimed at modernizing the Chinese state, its administration, education, laws, economy, technology, military, and police systems. Many of these reforms had been advocated by writers for decades past, only now they were decreed by the emperor. Unfortunately, unlike the first hundred days of Franklin D. Roosevelt, which legislated the New Deal in 1933, the radical reforms of 1898 remained largely on paper while officials waited to see what the Empress Dowager would do. She waited until nearly everyone in the establishment felt threatened by the proposed changes and then staged a military coup d'état. Kang and Liang escaped to Japan, but she confined Guangxu to the southern island in the palace lake and executed the six radicals she could catch.

Informed mainly by the self-serving writings of Kang and Liang, many have viewed the fiasco of the Hundred Days of 1898 in black and white terms, seeing Kang, Liang, and the emperor as heroes defeated by evil reactionaries. The opening of the Palace Museum Archives in Taipei and the Number One Historical Archives at Beijing has now allowed a revisionist like Luke S. K. Kwong (1984) to reinterpret the events of 1898 and specialists like Benjamin Elman to question some of his questionings. The Beijing politics of 1898 require fuller appraisal.

In any case, the most die-hard Manchu princes, whose palace upbringing had left them ignorant of the world and proud of it, soon be-

came patrons of a peasant secret society, the Boxers. This turning of the Manchu court to active support of a fanatical cult was an obvious act of intellectual bankruptcy.

The Boxer Rising, 1898–1901

In northwest Shandong on the floodplain of the Yellow River, the rather dense population had become so poor that few gentry lived in the villages, and banditry had become a seasonal occupation that inspired intervillage feuds. The Qing government and gentry were losing control. During the 1890s aggressive German missionaries had attracted converts to Catholicism partly by supporting them in lawsuits against non-Christians. After their seizure of Shandong as a sphere of influence in 1898, the Germans' arrogance heightened the anti-Christian sentiment that had long been accumulating as Christian missions spread into the interior while the European powers and Japan repeatedly humbled the Chinese government. Antimissionary riots had led the foreigners to exact such onerous penalties that Qing policy required magistrates to avoid antagonizing the missionaries and their converts. In this situation Shandong peasants defended their interests through secret societies. In southwest Shandong, for example, the Big Sword Society became a force for bandit suppression. In 1898 a disastrous Yellow River flood followed by prolonged drought put the villagers in dire straits. North China became a tinderbox.

Joseph Esherick's (1987) masterly study of the Boxers' origins pinpoints the combining in northwest Shandong of two peasant traditions—the technique of the martial arts or “boxing” (featured in operas and storytelling and visible today in movies of *gongfu* combat) and the practice of spirit possession or shamanism. (We may recall from Chapter 2 that the king of the Shang dynasty had acted as the chief shaman.) The Spirit Boxers, who later took the name Boxers United in Righteousness, put together these two elements. After appropriate rituals, Boxers went into a trance, foamed at the mouth, and arose prepared for combat because they were now invulnerable to swords or bullets. Anyone could be possessed and so for the moment become a leader. No hierarchic organization was necessary. The aim was the simple slogan, “Support the Qing, destroy the foreign.” Once ignited in the propitious circumstances of the times, the Boxer movement spread across North China like wildfire. The Manchu princes, and even the Empress Dowager for a time, felt they heard the voice of the common people, the final arbiter of

Chinese politics. They proposed to work with the movement, not against it, and so get rid of foreign imperialism.

In the sequence of events, each side aroused the other. Legation guards in the spring of 1900 went out shooting Boxers to intimidate them. By June 13–14 Boxers broke into Beijing and Tianjin, killing Christians and looting. On June 10, 2,100 foreign troops had started from Tianjin to defend the Beijing legations but got only halfway. On June 17 a foreign fleet attacked the coastal forts outside Tianjin. On June 21 the Empress Dowager and the dominant group at court formally declared war on all the powers. As she said, “China is weak. The only thing we can depend upon is the hearts of the people. If we lose them, how can we maintain our country?” (By country she meant dynasty.)

The Boxer Rising in the long, hot summer of 1900 was one of the best-known events of the nineteenth century because so many diplomats, missionaries, and journalists were besieged by almost incessant rifle fire for eight weeks (June 29–August 14) in the Beijing legation quarter—about 475 foreign civilians, 450 troops of eight nations, and some 3,000 Chinese Christians, also about 150 racing ponies, who provided fresh meat. An international army rescued them, not without bickering, after rumors they had all been killed. The Empress Dowager, with the emperor safely in tow, took off for Xi’an by cart. The allied forces thoroughly looted Beijing. Kaiser Wilhelm II sent a field marshal, who terrorized the surrounding towns, where many thousands of Chinese Christians had been slaughtered; 250 foreigners, mainly missionaries, had been killed across North China. Vengeance was in the air.

But the Chinese provincial governors-general who had led the effort at self-strengthening also coped with this crisis. Li Hongzhang at Guangzhou, Zhang Zhidong at Wuhan, and the others had decided right away in June to ignore Beijing’s declaration of war. They declared the whole thing simply a “Boxer Rebellion,” and they guaranteed peace in Central and South China if the foreigners would keep their troops and gunboats out. This make-believe worked. The imperialist powers preferred to keep the treaty system intact, together with China’s foreign-debt payments. And so the War of 1900, the fifth and largest that the Qing fought with foreign powers in the nineteenth century, was localized in North China.

The Boxer protocol signed in September 1901 by the top Manchu prince and Li Hongzhang with eleven foreign powers was mainly punitive: ten high officials were executed and one hundred others punished;

the examinations were suspended in forty-five cities; the legation quarter in Beijing was enlarged, fortified, and garrisoned, as was the railway, and some twenty-five Qing forts were destroyed. The indemnity was about \$333 million, to be paid over forty years at interest rates that would more than double the amount. The only semiconstructive act was to raise the treaty-based import tariff to an actual 5 percent.

Demoralization

The Confucian-based system of government stressed the impeccable conduct of rulers, officials, and leaders in family and community as the sanction for their superior position and privileges. To an unusual degree, China was governed by prestige. Emperors might in fact be knaves or fools, but the imperial institution was sacrosanct. Official pronouncements were aimed at maintaining and improving the image of the power-holders. Losers were stigmatized as lacking in morality, which accounted for their losing out. A man's maintenance of his good name was as important as his life, an idea that applied even more to women. People whose reputations had been blackened could redeem themselves by suicide. In the society as in the government, reputation was all-important. In this context where moral opinion outranked legal considerations, demoralization could be a stark fact of immeasurable significance. Loss of confidence, sense of humiliation, personal or collective loss of face, consciousness of failure in conduct—there were many forms of this disaster in the nineteenth century.

In the most general sense, then, the last century of the Qing stands forth in retrospect as a unified period surcharged with demoralization on many fronts. The century began with the inordinate corruption of the Qianlong Emperor's favorite, Heshen, which besmirched the emperor's reputation. At the same time the failure of the bannermen to quell the White Lotus uprising was a defeat for the dynasty, which had to recruit new troops from the Chinese populace.

If we skip along touching only highlights of moral disaster we must note the rise of the opium trade at Guangzhou and its expansion along the southeast coast. Long since denounced as immoral, opium caused a fiscal crisis when it led to the outflow of silver and upset the silver/copper exchange ratio, to the detriment of peasants who had to pay taxes by purchasing silver with copper coins. China's acceptance of British terms at Nanjing in 1842 could be advertised by the negotiators as skillful deflection of the foreign menace, but the whole empire could see that

opium was still arriving in increasing amounts and the problems of Guangzhou were being multiplied at four new ports of trade. While these were peripheral matters of the frontier, they figured at Beijing in the struggle between money-minded appeasement and suppression according to moral principle. Commissioner Lin could not be cashiered without his moral posture being betrayed. The opium trade, legalized by treaty in 1858, was suborning Chinese officialdom, and the court had to go along in a tremendous loss of face. Very shortly came the Taiping Rebellion, which spread so rapidly, once ignited, that one must assume that a lack of imperial repute paved its way from the West River to Nanjing.

Suppression of the rebellion was achieved only after the Qing rulers at Beijing accepted a basic revision of the balance of power between the Manchu dynasty at the capital and loyal Chinese officials in the provinces. Beijing had to put its trust in provincial leaders like Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang and their new armies, which were financed by new provincial taxes on trade. It was a fundamental change in the Qing power structure, evidenced, for example, in the fact that Chinese officials thereafter held the top governor-generalships in the metropolitan province around Beijing and in the Lower Yangzi rice basket at Nanjing. The Qing also had to accept a degree of foreign participation in Chinese political life.

To say, as we are justified in doing, that the downward course of Qing fortunes was arrested by the Restoration of the 1860s is nevertheless a confession that the dynasty's days were numbered. The expediency of the Restoration was evident in the Qing acceptance of an informal alliance with the British and French after the humiliating invasion of Beijing and burning of the Summer Palace in 1860. The long process of war and negotiation during the 1850s and 60s between China and the Western powers had been marked by a general Chinese readiness to fight in defense of principle and a general Manchu readiness to appease the invader in the interests of preserving the dynasty. The appeasement achieved by Prince Gong and his backers, including the young Empress Dowager, was a very expedient move and gave the dynasty another generation of existence. Yet its practical implications were to make the Qing in some ways a minor partner in the Anglo-Qing co-dominion of the China coast.

The Imperial Maritime Customs Service built up in the treaty ports by Robert Hart under the wing of the leading Manchu in the Grand Council, Wenxiang, exhibited the double edge of imperialism. During

the first half or more of his constructive administration Hart provided the Qing with a modern revenue agency as well as a device for managing bellicose foreigners in their treaty ports. This was on the whole a great boon to the Chinese state, but after 1895 when the loans had to be contracted to pay the indemnities to Japan and after 1901 to the Boxer protocol signers, Customs became an obvious agent of imperialism by levying upon the Chinese state the repayment of indemnities.

Behind this comparative success in Manchu-Chinese cooperation with the treaty powers for the maintenance of order, there was a split between the interests of the Manchu dynasty and the interests of the Chinese people, which could gradually be seen as two separate things. But beneath this was the larger query as to China's capacity to meet the foreign incursion not only in military and economic matters but also on the intellectual plane.

Not only was the performance of the Chinese state inadequate, the basic principles of the Neo-Confucian order were called into question. This was a greater crisis than had faced the late Ming or any earlier dynasty except perhaps the Song. But whereas the Song had shown their cultural superiority even when defeated, the Chinese who became acquainted with Western matters could not conclude that the superiority of Chinese culture was still a fact. The growth of opium addiction throughout the society was a persistent witness to the loss of self-confidence. Jonathan Spence has made a well-informed guess that by 1900 there were about 40 million Chinese consumers of opium, of whom about 15 million were addicts. This meant that for every Chinese converted to Christianity there were some 15 addicted to opium.

Finally, a sense of doom and disaster demoralized the scholar class, the central guardians of the Neo-Confucian faith. The next chapter therefore concentrates on the relations of the dynasty with the gentry-elite.