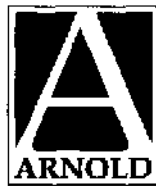


# China

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## *The world of nation states*

The ways in which the Qing empire dealt with foreign affairs grew out of the ways in which its internal structure and identity were perceived. There were thus two possible models for foreign affairs, one based on the theory of culturalism and the other on the idea of an international empire. During the eighteenth century there was little conflict between these two models. However, when the state came into conflict with the Western powers the differences between the models became acute and began to play an important part in court politics, creating ethnically based Han and Manchu political constituencies within the bureaucracy.

### **Changing models of foreign affairs**

The model of foreign affairs based on the theory of culturalism is known as the tribute system. In this system, as famously described by John K. Fairbank, the representatives of foreign countries visiting China were treated as bearers of tribute from their country to the emperor of China. They travelled from the borders of the country to its heart in Beijing and there presented their tribute of gifts and local products to the emperor, received gifts in return and then returned to their homelands. The system preserved the ideal of a single moral universe whose values were embodied in the Confucian texts and the Chinese system of government. China was seen as the centre of the world and also the centre of morality; other nations, by definition less civilised, paid tribute that showed the subservient status of their kings to the Chinese emperor. This system worked best for some of those neighbouring countries that had long been part of a Chinese cultural area, in particular Korea, Vietnam and the Ryukyu Islands. Korea sent annual embassies and others to thank or congratulate the emperor or to offer condolences on his death. These embassies expressed the ritual subservience of the Korean king, by requesting, for example, a copy of the imperial calendar every year, but they also dealt with such matters as fixing

the border between the two states and setting up military posts and colonies in the border areas. In the tributary countries elites accepted the value of elements of Chinese culture and thought, while their rulers used the legitimacy conveyed by their relationship with the Chinese state to strengthen their own power. However the model of the tribute mission was also plausible for complete outsiders: a Dutch embassy of 1794 presented itself in accordance with the tribute model. This was possible since there were relatively few demands made on the mission beyond the humble language and posture expected of its members. Moreover, both the gifts offered by the court in return for the tribute and the private trade done by members of the mission meant that a tribute mission could be extremely profitable. When the Netherlands sent a tribute mission Dutch merchants were merely accommodating to the outward forms for national or personal advantage. However, for the Chinese the idea of China as 'all under Heaven' and the emperor as the 'Son of Heaven', whose moral influence spread beyond the boundaries of the state, appeared as proof of the universality of Confucian moral structures and worked to legitimate the scholarly class and its position within a culturalist world order.

The other model of foreign affairs was that provided by the Manchu dynasty's model of itself at the head of a multi-national empire. Within this empire it dealt with the different peoples according to their own customs and needs. The model of foreign affairs that corresponds to this view of the empire can be seen in the dynasty's relations with Russia. Embassies were sent between the two states for major negotiations and there was a permanent Russian mission in Beijing. However, this pragmatic model of foreign affairs was used almost exclusively with relation to the powers of north and Central Asia, which the Qing regarded as strategically threatening, a situation that created problems when in the nineteenth century Western traders on the south coast began to cause trouble.

### *The British threat to the tribute system*

During the eighteenth century the European states that had any contact with China had accepted the general outlines of the tribute mission. Indeed, between 1655 and 1795 there had been 17 European missions to China, all of which had been largely compatible with the tribute system. Even the British embassy led by Lord Macartney in 1793, in which Lord Macartney famously (to us) refused to kowtow to the emperor, carried gifts labelled as tribute from the kingdom of England, and whatever Lord Macartney's actual actions the Chinese records stated that he had kowtowed. An eighteenth-century illustrated volume describing the customs of tribute-bearing peoples shows how the Europeans were assimilated into conventional Chinese models of non-Han peoples. The illustration of the English shows a man and a woman in eighteenth-century dress (Fig. 3.1). The man wears a

### *Image Not Available*

**Figure 3.1** The English as seen by the eighteenth-century Chinese  
Source: *Huang Qing zhiqong tu* (Tribute-bearers of the Qing Dynasty).  
Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1986, vol. 1, p. 46

sword while the woman's chest and lower arms are bare, features which are reminiscent of the illustrations of Taiwan native peoples in the same book (Figs 1.4 and 1.5) and suggestive of barbarian status. The written description that accompanies the picture reads:

This barbarian people's clothing and adornment resemble that of a country that is very wealthy. The males mostly wear wool and love to drink wine. The females, when they have not yet married, bind their waists, desiring that they be slender. They wear dishevelled hair which hangs over their eyebrows, short clothing and layers of skirts. When they go out for a walk, then they add a big coat.<sup>1</sup>

Like other non-Han peoples the English are understood primarily in terms of their clothing and customs, and the structure of the brief paragraph implies the power relations that were expected between peripheral peoples and Chinese civilisation. In fact, much more information about Europe had come from the Jesuit missionaries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who had been useful to the court and were acknowledged to be experts in such specialist fields as astronomy and mathematics. It was understood that their religion was not entirely compatible with the Confucian system, but they argued from Confucian texts and had been

treated much like other heterodox sects. The threat to the Confucian system was not from Jesuit Christianity but from the European and American traders who began to arrive in the southern city of Guangzhou.

At first the Chinese state dealt with the small community of foreign traders in Guangzhou according to a model used for non-Han merchant communities in peripheral regions: the foreigners were to live in their own part of the town with a headman who would administer their affairs and be responsible for their behaviour to the Chinese authorities. The role of headman was played by the representatives of the British East India Company. In addition, the foreign traders were controlled through an arrangement where they were compelled to deal only with a monopoly of Chinese merchants (the Cohong) and the trade was taxed through a Superintendent of Maritime Customs for Guangdong appointed by the court. From the late eighteenth century all European trade was supposed to be confined to Guangzhou and the major tea and silk trades were confined to the Cohong monopoly. Under these conditions the trade was extremely profitable for all concerned and the Chinese merchants of the Cohong grew fabulously rich.

However, by the 1830s the very size of the trade was beginning to put pressure on the system. This pressure was increased when the East India Company's monopoly ended in 1834. Private trade had been growing fast in the preceding years, as had imports of opium, which foreign traders hoped would balance their huge exports of tea and silk. After 1834 competition between the East India Company's opium and opium from other Indian sources caused a drop in prices and a consequent boom in the quantity that was being sold. The expansion of the trade combined with the fact that opium was illegal in China meant that more and more trade was taking place outside the monopoly and causing disorder in the areas around the city. Pressures of this sort led to calls by the foreign traders for a new system. In England ideas of free trade were increasingly popular and the British merchants became more and more resentful of having to deal in China through the monopoly Cohong. They began to demand new rights that would break the Cohong's power, specifically the opening of other ports to European trade and the establishment of a fixed rate of tax.

The British merchants also resented being thought of as savages or barbarians. The British interpreter Thomas Meadows reported some years later in 1852 that:

The Chinese do habitually call and consider Europeans 'barbarians'; meaning by that term 'people in a rude, uncivilised state, morally and intellectually uncultivated' . . . Those Chinese who have had direct opportunities of learning something of our customs and culture – they may amount, taking all Five Ports, to some five or six thousand out of three hundred and sixty millions – mostly consider us as beneath their nation in moral and intellectual cultivation. As to those who have had

no such opportunities, I do not recollect conversing with one, and I have conversed with many, whose previous notions of us were not analogous to those we entertain of savages. They are always surprised, not to say astonished, to learn that we have surnames, and understand the family distinctions of father, brother, wife, sister, etc.; in short, that we live otherwise than as a herd of cattle.<sup>2</sup>

The emphasis on family relationships (institutionalised in surnames) points to the importance of Confucian values in defining civilised, and hence Chinese, behaviour. We have already noticed that Guangdong was an area where Han ethnicity was relatively recent and an important marker of status and power. The Han Chinese families of the Pearl River delta around Guangzhou bolstered their position both through their customs and practices and by their assertions of the links between those customs and practices and the values of the Confucian classics. However, it was clearly irritating for Europeans and Americans, whose expansive new culture was built on the image of themselves as the bearers of civilisation to the non-Western world, to be treated as uncivilised barbarians. Meadows states the conflict quite explicitly when he comments that Chinese notions of Westerners are 'analogous to those we entertain of savages'. The Europeans' response was to emphasise their own civilisation and the savagery of the Chinese. This they found exemplified in the methods of the Chinese legal system, which led to the concept of extra-territoriality, one of the pillars of the later semi-colonial treaty settlement. Western resentment of Chinese attitudes also led to a fanatical emphasis on prestige in official contacts, which eventually made the formalities of the tribute system impossible.

Into this increasingly difficult situation in Guangzhou stepped Lin Zexu, a new official sent directly by Beijing. Lin Zexu was not particularly interested in the concerns of the Western traders, so to understand his actions we need to turn to the attitudes of the court in Beijing towards the Guangzhou trade. The court was aware that the balance of trade in Guangzhou had shifted from the export of tea and silk, paid for largely in silver, to the import of opium. Ministers viewed opium smoking as morally objectionable, but this was not their major concern with the trade. Instead they saw the trade as a possible explanation for recent rises in the price of silver in relation to copper, which were disturbing the economy and especially tax collection. The outflow of silver to pay for opium imports was not the only explanation for rising silver prices given by Qing officials at the time and the view of economic historians today is that, though there may have been an outflow of silver from time to time, in general imports of opium were in fact balanced by exports of tea and silk. However that may be, when Lin Zexu proposed ending the opium trade to solve the currency problems, the court accepted his proposal and sent him to Guangzhou to carry it out.

The 'Opium War' that followed this decision has long been viewed as marking the beginning of a new period in Chinese history, which means that

there is an unfortunate tendency to imagine that everyone knew at the time how important the issues relating to Western traders in Guangzhou were. This is not the case. As many historians, most recently James Polachek, have argued, Guangzhou and its affairs were regarded by the court as peripheral and not of strategic importance. A glance at a map shows the immense distance between Beijing and Guangzhou, especially at a time when travel was almost entirely by land. Guangzhou was at the outermost reaches of the empire and its people, despite their endless efforts to defend their customs in Confucian terms, were not considered by the northerners to be fully Chinese. Meanwhile strategic thinking was concentrated on the northern and northwestern borders, which had produced China's earlier conquerors. Lin Zexu and his supporters in court viewed the Westerners as traders and pirates, tied to the sea and with no serious political ambitions. For this they had a well-known model in the Japan-based coastal raiders of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Seeing the matter in this light, Lin Zexu took up his post in Guangzhou intending to stop the opium trade quickly and effectively, and thus solve the currency crisis. With this in hand he would then be in a good position to get himself appointed to the governor-generalship of Guangdong and Guangxi. His ultimate political aim seems to have been quite different, namely the reduction of the power and expenditure of the Yellow River Conservancy through changes in the way in which tribute grain was shipped from the Yangzi delta to Beijing. He arrived in Guangzhou in 1839 and immediately took action, dramatically destroying 20,000 chests of opium and imprisoning the foreigners in their quarter until their headman agreed that they would not trade opium in future. In this dramatic style Lin Zexu precipitated the tensions among the foreign traders in Guangzhou into a full-blown crisis.

The British consul summoned help and a fleet sailed from India to take reprisals on the Chinese government. Given the earlier objections of the British traders to the mechanisms of trade in Guangzhou, it is not surprising that the British expedition soon acquired the additional aim of forcing the Chinese to agree to alter the trading system. The Opium War, as it became known, fell into two stages. First British troops besieged Guangzhou but then agreed to accept a ransom and withdraw. During the siege the troops looted and raided villages and stories circulated of rape and of their having opened the tombs of the villagers' ancestors to see how the corpses were embalmed. In the atmosphere of panic that naturally resulted, the local gentry began to raise militia forces. This was in any case very much in line with the ideas of the new imperial commissioner, Lin Zexu, and his supporters at court, who believed that the solution to many of the state's problems lay in the moral regeneration of the local gentry and their active involvement in the management of their communities. It was also a natural response in an area that had a history of feuding between powerful lineages that often led to serious fighting between villages.

What was to become the most famous incident of the war occurred near

the village of Sanyuanli, a few kilometres from Guangzhou, when a small group of British troops got lost in a violent rainstorm. Because of the rain their muskets would not fire and they were then met by a crowd of more than 7,000 villagers with all the arms they could muster. One of the British soldiers was pulled out of line and killed by the villagers and 14 more were wounded before another party of troops came back to rescue them. Exaggeration of these events resulted in the news of a great victory by the villagers and the next day 12,000 more gathered, but were dispersed by Qing officials who had already agreed to ransom the city from the British and did not want more trouble. The battle of Sanyuanli has subsequently been considered by Chinese nationalists to be the first major illustration of patriotic resistance to foreign imperialism. Other writers have argued that the villagers who took part were merely xenophobic. Neither assertion can easily be proved. The huge crowds of villagers who gathered round Sanyuanli were quite probably motivated neither by love of the Qing empire, which did not appear at the time to be significantly threatened, nor by an irrational fear of foreigners, but by a quite rational desire to protect their lives and property from an invading army.

During the second stage of the war the British fleet sailed north to the mouth of the Yangzi and then up to Dagu just outside Tianjin, threatening the court in Beijing. Lin Zexu was held responsible for the war, dismissed and sent into exile while the British were persuaded to return to Guangzhou. There negotiations were held about British demands to change the trading system, but these failed and the next year the British fleet sailed north again. They captured the county town of Shanghai and the major internal port of Zhenjiang and threatened Nanjing. Negotiators were sent by the court to deal with them and the two sides made an agreement, the Treaty of Nanjing, which laid down new rules about trade and the management of the British community in China. The treaty achieved the British expedition's primary aim of ending the Guangzhou Cohong's monopoly over the Western trade by opening five more ports to foreign trade and replacing the flexible system of taxation with fixed tariffs on imports and exports. In addition to this, the British were allowed to keep the small rocky island of Hong Kong, which they had occupied during the war, and were paid off by the Qing government. However, negotiations were hampered by the fact that the British negotiators were demanding to be treated as the victors in a war between states as the recent events would have been understood in Europe, while the Qing emperor was receiving reports that described the British as rebels and assumed that the aim was to pacify them. It was thus inevitable that the terms of the treaty would be understood differently by the two sides, a situation that was exacerbated by difficulties in translation and hence in the terminology of the Chinese and English versions.

The chief Qing negotiator of the Treaty of Nanjing was a Manchu named Qiying and British negotiators noticed both the presence of the 'Tartars' and their greater flexibility when compared to the Han Chinese officials. This



reflected the growing power over foreign relations of a Manchu faction at court that was to dominate official foreign policy for most of the next 10 years. The Manchu tradition of pragmatic and flexible relationships with the various peoples on the borders of their empire, as well as the Manchus' own differences from the Han population, enabled them to be relatively flexible, especially about the outer forms of foreign relations with which the British were so concerned. They were aware of the military strength the British fleet had displayed and in the years following the treaty their primary policy aim was to avoid trouble. However, such an approach was contingent on the continued dominance of the Manchu faction at court.

### *Chinese objections to the treaties*

It was probably inevitable that the Treaty of Nanjing would not be fully implemented. Firstly, by this time Qing emperors had relatively little control over their officials in the provinces and had considerable difficulty getting any policy changes implemented. In addition to these general problems, it was immediately obvious that powerful vested interests in Guangzhou were going to suffer as a result of the treaty settlement. The fortunes of the Guangzhou monopolists and tax collectors had been of little interest to the Manchu negotiators in Nanjing, but the implementation of the treaty affected them greatly. Both the opening of five more ports to foreign trade and the replacement of the previous taxation system with a fixed tariff shifted trade away from the Guangzhou merchants. In Guangzhou relations between the British and Chinese deteriorated; foreigners out walking were stoned and fights broke out. This would not have been important if the people of Guangzhou had not been supported by powerful interests at court.

At court in Beijing many officials had been raised in a strongly moralistic school of politics. This was a product of the examination system, success in which demanded both the expression of morality and the cultivation of relationships within the bureaucracy. The simple fact that most Han officials had risen through the strictest form of the examination system, while most Manchu members of the court had not, tended to bring about divisions at court, where the moralistic style of such officials as Lin Zexu and later Zeng Guofan was the preserve of Han Chinese. The result was a Han Chinese faction whose members were aware of their weakness with relation to the Manchu aristocrats dominating the court and were searching for ways to increase their own power. They knew that the legitimacy of their power rested on the examination system and thus on the preservation of the ideas and morality it embodied. This gave them a much greater investment than the Manchus in the ideals that lay behind culturalism, and they quickly perceived that that ideal was threatened by the treaty settlement. In addition an influential group of Han Chinese literati shared Lin Zexu's ideals about the moral renewal of local society and were connected with him through

factional alignments. Their desire to defend Lin Zexu and to attack the Manchu negotiators meant that they had to take a certain line about the war that had just taken place. They depicted the first stage of the war, in which the British besieged Guangzhou and then left to sail up the coast, as a victory by Lin Zexu and the local militia forces. The incident at Sanyuanli village was described as a major victory for the militia, by dint of considerable exaggeration of the numbers of British dead. To make this victory important Lin Zexu and his defenders claimed that Guangzhou was the pirates' real aim and only when they were driven off by the successful defence did they move north looking for a weak point in China's coastal defences. This then showed that the war could have been won and that the later failures were due to poor management rather than inherent weaknesses. The British were by no means the only rebel band to capture county towns and even major cities during this period, and the war was to be dismissed as pirate raiding in a peripheral region.

The Han Chinese literati faction's refusal to accept either the Qing defeat or the subsequent treaty meant that it was impossible to implement the Treaty of Nanjing fully. Failure to do so led to tension between the factions at court in Beijing and on the ground in Guangzhou. Frustrations on both sides led to another war, the Second Opium War (or Arrow War) of 1857, fought over a petty and dubious incident in which the British consul demanded an apology from the Guangdong governor general for the boarding, by Qing officers searching for pirates, of a ship named the *Arrow* and the arrest of some of her crew. The *Arrow* was a new mixed design of ship with Chinese sails and a Western hull, and was owned by a Chinese resident in Hong Kong. The British stood on very weak ground and the Guangdong governor general, who was a supporter of Lin Zexu and his strong policies, refused to provide the required apology. After issuing an ultimatum, the British, acting together with the French, took the city of Guangzhou and governed it for the next three years, shipping the governor general off to Calcutta. In a repeat of events 15 years earlier, a British fleet moved north round the Chinese coast. This time, however, they captured the city of Tianjin, Beijing's main port. There they negotiated the Treaty of Tianjin, the provisions of which went well beyond those of the earlier Treaty of Nanjing. The Qing were forced to agree to the opening of 10 more Treaty ports where foreigners would be allowed to live and trade, and foreign travel was to be permitted throughout the country. The expectation that much trade with foreigners would now take place in China's interior provinces was provided for with a requirement that internal Chinese customs should not amount to more than 2.5 per cent of the value of the goods traded. The British also, as before, demanded a financial indemnity. The most problematic item in the treaty was the requirement that foreign diplomats should be allowed to reside in the capital. This did not take place until 1860, when a foreign expedition of some 17,000 British and French troops entered the capital and sacked the emperor's Summer Palace.

The Treaty of Tianjin formed the basis for the so-called treaty system in which Westerners and their communities, known as 'concessions', held a privileged place within Chinese society. The requirement that foreigners live in their own communities administered by their own headman had originally been imposed by the Qing state. However, these communities grew into areas of legal privilege available to all foreigners but to Chinese only at a price. The privileges of the foreign concessions were of two kinds: preferential taxation and the application of British commercial law. The preferential taxation of businesses based in the concessions was due to the fact that although the Qing state had been forced to agree to taxation through a single tariff for foreigners it had not changed the taxation arrangements for its own merchants. Thus foreign merchants paid a low and predictable rate of tax on their businesses while Chinese merchants outside the concessions continued to pay higher and, more importantly, unpredictable amounts of tax, with the sums dependent largely on personal relationships with government officials. The natural result of this was that the foreign merchants made these privileges available to the Chinese, but at a price: by the time of the Treaty of Tianjin British merchants were already operating a black market in transit passes for goods. The application of British commercial law made legal action possible in business disputes and made the outcome relatively predictable. This was in contrast to the Chinese legal system in which business disputes tended to be shrouded in criminal accusations. The privileges for foreign businesses within the concessions gave huge advantages to foreign merchants and consequently Chinese domestic trade too began to operate through the concessions. This was done at a price and the rewards accrued to the foreign firms of the concessions. Perhaps the most outstanding example is the almost total takeover of the coastal trade by foreign shipping in the years immediately following the Treaty of Nanjing.

The Qing government was tied to the treaty system by the revenue provided to it by the new foreign-run Imperial Maritime Customs. This was an innovation established as a result of local negotiations in Shanghai in 1853, during the secret society Small Sword uprising mentioned in Chapter 2. When the Small Sword society captured Shanghai county town, the British consul decided to take over the collection of the tariff on foreign trade. The Shanghai local government was soon restored to office, but the British consul refused to hand over the back payments unless foreign inspectors were employed to run a Western-style customs service to collect the tariff. An agreement was made whereby Westerners were employed by the Chinese government as officials to collect the customs tax, which was then handed over to the central government. The significance of this arrangement lay in the fact that because of the aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion and resulting military reforms the Chinese provinces were significantly reducing the amounts of money they were handing over to the central government. The large and reliable revenue provided by the foreign-run Imperial

Maritime Customs thus became a major financial pillar of the central government, and was later used as security for the foreign loans that provided yet more income for the otherwise cash-strapped central government. Under these circumstances the central government gradually became dependent on the treaty system. This naturally affected the balance of power at court.

### *Growing political power of the Han Chinese*

From the 1840s diplomatic engagement with the foreigners had been largely a Manchu preserve. The remnants of this can be seen in the institutions set up by the court after the Treaty of Tianjin in 1860 to deal with foreign affairs. Diplomacy was to be controlled by the emperor's brother Prince Gong through a special bureau known as the Zongli Yamen, or General Affairs Bureau, which took charge of all matters related to the Westerners. The Zongli Yamen was initially an entirely Manchu organisation, though it soon employed large numbers of Han Chinese. Shortly after it was founded it established an interpreters' college in Beijing to train Manchu bannermen in foreign languages and thus continue the Manchu dominance of diplomacy. The organisation of the Zongli Yamen was intended to maintain the separation between Han culturalism and Manchu diplomacy. Through it the court would combine the reality of new treaty concessions with the appearance of respect for those members of the scholarly elite who had opposed them. But changes in the balance of power at court had by now made such a separation impossible to achieve. The different reactions to the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 and the Treaty of Tianjin in 1858 illustrate a significant change in foreign policy that had already occurred by the time the Zongli Yamen was set up. The clearest example of this shift is the extreme resistance to the idea of foreign diplomatic representation in Beijing when this was demanded by the foreign negotiators in 1858. Foreign diplomats were only allowed to reside in Beijing after British and French troops had entered the capital and stormed the emperor's summer palace. Foreign missions permanently in residence in the capital did, of course, undermine the symbolism of the tribute system. However, a Russian mission had existed in Beijing for nearly 200 years. The acceptability of this Russian mission was premised on Manchu models of international empire and the pragmatic conduct of foreign affairs. By 1860 this model of foreign affairs had been abandoned in place of a passionate, but by now totally implausible, belief in the tribute system.

This new emphasis on the tribute system grew out of the military reforms that followed the Taiping Rebellion. Throughout the period of the Opium Wars the Qing dynasty was primarily concerned with the Taipings, who were eventually defeated under the command of Zeng Guofan, a committed Confucian and a leading member of the Han scholarly elite. Zeng Guofan's

ideas arose from much the same background as those of the ill-fated Lin Zexu. Like Lin Zexu he believed that what was needed to solve the state's problems was the moral renovation of local society, starting with the local gentry and involving the mobilisation of peasant militias in times of trouble. He had raised an army based on these principles to fight the Taiping, selecting members of local elites, many of whom had examination degrees, as officers. They then recruited soldiers from their home districts who were paid by levies also raised in the area. The resulting army had a strong local base and tight lines of loyalty between commander and men. The structure of the army also circumvented the Manchu banner forces with their strong ties to the dynasty.

After the death of the Xianfeng emperor in 1859, the rise of the Han Chinese literati continued because of the weakness of the central government. The empresses dowager Cian and Cixi, the mother of the new Tongzhi emperor, succeeded in becoming regents. Cian died a few years later, but Cixi ruled for more than 40 years. Initially the new regents were weak because of their lack of experience of government. However, even in later years, Cixi was hampered by the fact that a female regency was not a legitimate form of government. This meant that the regents were dependent on the general support of the court. In fact the whole period has been described by Luke Kwong as one of coalition government where power was dispersed rather than concentrated in the person of the emperor. One of the most obvious results of the dispersal of power within the court was the rise of the provincial governors general. These men headed the provincial bureaucracies and were the highest officials stationed outside Beijing. With a weak central government they began to abrogate more and more powers to themselves. Zeng Guofan and others had raised armies to fight the Taiping that were financed from locally raised revenue. At the same time, the devastation caused by the Taiping and other rebellions meant that in these areas the land tax, which went to the central government, often had to be remitted. In effect what this meant was that more of what was being extracted from the provinces through taxation was going to the provincial governments and less to the central government. The trend continued as the central government allowed regional governors general to continue to raise taxes for local purposes after the end of the rebellion. Gradually the central government began to lose control over provincial revenue. The impact of this process was initially concealed, however, by the rapidly increasing revenues from the new foreign-run maritime customs which were being received by the central government. Meanwhile the governors general in the provinces began to use their new resources to build up the power of their positions and bureaucracies.

Like the central government, the regional governors general were primarily concerned during this period with the necessity for military reforms that would enable the state to resist rebellion or invasion. During the 1860s they were the leading force in a series of reforms, known as the

'self-strengthening' movement, that were driven by the recognition of the superiority of Western weapons, which had been demonstrated both in the British and French march on Beijing and in the campaigns against the Taiping, where Qing soldiers had used imported arms. In the 1860s plans were put forward and accepted to manufacture these weapons. The Jiangnan Arsenal was established in 1865 with its own language school and translation bureau so that the staff could understand the foreign technical manuals involved. A couple of years later a naval dockyard was set up in Fuzhou with a school that taught courses in either engineering and French or navigation and English. The dockyard employed as many as 70 foreign members of staff as well as the local degree-holders, who acted as managers, and the students. Officials in charge of these enterprises were quick to realise that military modernisation required more than armaments. It was also necessary for staff study to first foreign languages and then the technical skills without which the arms could not be effectively used. Railways and telegraph lines were needed for military communications. Building railway lines required steel, and steel mills created a demand for high-grade coal. Thus officials began to set up the forerunners of a whole variety of modern industries. They saw that success in these ventures, given the official context, would require changes in the system of education and thus in the examination system that drove it. The director of the Fuzhou Naval Dockyard, for example, proposed that mathematics should be included in the examination system for appointing government officials. The near bankruptcy of the central government and the importance of regionally based and funded armies in defeating the Taiping meant that the majority of these projects were funded and controlled by the increasingly powerful group of Han Chinese regional officials.

The degree of the involvement of the powerful governors general in self-strengthening projects can be illustrated by the interests of Li Hongzhang, Governor General of Zhili and Commissioner of the Northern Ports. Li Hongzhang had begun his high official career as a protégé of Zeng Guofan in the battle against the Taiping and then the Nian rebels who rose up in the power vacuum created by the Taiping chaos. Later he invested the training funds for his army in a modern shipping operation, the China Merchants' Steam Navigation Company, for which he also acted as official patron. Li Hongzhang's close involvement with the company meant that in later years he was able to use its ships for transporting his troops and to develop his own naval forces. Further funding for these activities was acquired from his control over customs revenues from Tianjin, north China's major port. The men like Li Hongzhang who came to power in the provinces during and after the suppression of the Taiping were Han Chinese and they gradually also came to control the foreign-affairs issues of their regions. *Modern Times*, a novel published in 1905, describes a visit by a foreign missionary to a high provincial official (probably based on Zhang Zhidong, another well-known governor general). When the missionary arrives in the city he

goes to a special foreign affairs office to inform them of his desire to visit the governor general.

Now the Foreign Affairs Office had long since received the Viceroy's instructions concerning foreigners. One of the Viceroy's strengths was his capacity to deal with different situations and to adapt to changing circumstances. Aware that over the years China had steadily declined, and that she was no longer as powerful or prosperous as other nations – that there were areas, even, in which she had to depend on foreigners – the Viceroy had completely discarded the arrogance of his youth, and had become very accommodating. He constantly instructed his subordinates in the following manner: 'In all your dealings with others, be guided by the principle of courtesy. Praising people will never lead to trouble. Since in our present circumstances we cannot win a fight, it is essential to enter into negotiations with them. Can we afford to adopt an attitude of superiority when our country's fortunes have reached such a low ebb?'<sup>3</sup>

Individuals like Li Hongzhang and Zhang Zhidong became increasingly pragmatic and realistic in their appreciation of the military capabilities and hence the options of the Qing state. However, the factional affiliations of court politics meant that the very prestige of these men provided backing for culturalist dealings with foreigners. Most of the regional power-holders of the late nineteenth century began as protégés of Zeng Guofan, who was famous for the strictness of his personal morality and his moralistic style of government. He insisted, for example, on going home to mourn the death of his mother for three years at a crucial stage in his military career. Filial piety lay at the heart of the Confucian morality and mourning the death of a parent was central to its expression. All officials were supposed to resign their posts on the death of a parent, but few as powerful as Zeng Guofan actually did so. Zeng Guofan's action was a public display of extreme morality, a statement to all that, for him, moral values were at the heart of government. Zeng Guofan's rise to power and the rise of the Han scholarly elite at court brought an end to the pragmatic Manchu control of foreign policy. The new power of the Han scholarly elite meant that until the end of the century the dynasty would derive its legitimacy from anti-Western conservatism. An emphasis on Confucian morality at the heart of government led naturally to a commitment to the values of culturalism in dealing with foreign affairs. Ultimately, therefore, the rhetoric of the tribute system was to be combined with the reality of the treaty system.

### *Local elite support for culturalism*

Culturalist ideas tended to be concentrated among officials, degree-holders and educated men who aspired to the status of scholars, and were often

expressed in attacks on Christianity, which was also unpopular with many ordinary people. Whereas for the central government the crucial issues of Western interference were essentially those of armed intervention, for local officials and degree-holders Christianity could be seen as the most serious threat to the imperial order. For if the social order was based, as these men's power was, on the premises of Confucian morality, then Christianity as a heterodox religious sect undermined that social order. Serious incidents tended to blow up with respect to the large Catholic communities, many of which had existed since the eighteenth century and were deeply embedded in local society, rather than the more recent and much smaller Protestant missions concentrated round the treaty ports.

The role of official and scholarly elite support for anti-Catholic rioting is illustrated by the stories of two otherwise quite different incidents that occurred in 1862 in Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi province, and in 1870 in Tianjin. Nanchang had long had a large Catholic community and the community's position was strengthened by the commitment not to persecute Catholics laid down in the Treaty of Tianjin. When, in 1862, a new Vatican official was appointed to take charge of the Jiangxi Catholic community, he demanded to be treated as of equivalent rank to a governor general and that the new treaty provisions should be widely advertised. The demand for high status for the foreign representative of a heterodox religion was in direct conflict with culturalist Confucian views. In response a couple of senior members of the gentry, one a member of the prestigious Hanlin academy in Beijing and the other a local lecturer, wrote and circulated two strongly anti-Christian manifestos. A new provincial governor took office, Shen Baozhen, the son-in-law of Lin Zexu, and not only did not treat the Vatican official with the rank he demanded but refused to see him at all. While all this was going on candidates began to gather for the provincial exams in the city. Given the degree of support from the political elite, it was hardly surprising when a riot broke out and much Catholic property was destroyed. The affair was not calmed by the new governor's announcement at the end of the first day of rioting that no arrests would be made. Acting in the same spirit he later refused to implement the compromise worked out between the Beijing government and French diplomats and was said to have claimed that the affair was 'a gratifying result of two hundred years of nurturing the scholar gentry'.<sup>4</sup>

In Nanchang the victims of anti-Christian rioting were Chinese Catholic families and businesses, and the governor succeeded in keeping Vatican officials out of the province. However victories like this exacerbated tensions elsewhere. A much more diplomatically serious incident occurred in 1870 in Tianjin, where French nuns had been offering money for orphans. In a society where daughters were regularly sold by their families it was not surprising that this was seen as a purchase and, eventually, that a man was arrested and confessed to kidnapping children for sale to the orphanage. The scandal was worse because the orphanage was eager to take dying chil-



dren and consequently had a very high death rate exacerbated by epidemics, one of which had recently broken out. Negotiations with the French authorities, who resided in the same compound as the orphanage and cathedral, brought an agreement that Chinese officials would be allowed to inspect the orphanage. However, when the city's three leading officials turned up with a large crowd of local dignitaries, the French consul panicked, shot at the magistrate and killed one of his attendants. In the ensuing rioting the consulate, cathedral and orphanage were all burned down and nineteen foreigners were killed as well as many Chinese Catholics. A major crisis was only averted by the fact that the Franco-Prussian War had just broken out when the news reached Paris.

Although the Tianjin riot was the most serious incident in terms of the loss of foreign lives, intermittent outbreaks of anti-Catholic violence were a feature of the period. Such outbreaks and especially the government's obvious unwillingness to punish the perpetrators of the violence fed the long-standing resentments of the foreign community in China at their unequal status, but above all strengthened the culturalist ideologies from which they arose.

## **The new modernisers and the origins of nationalism**

However, culturalism was no longer the only possible attitude towards foreigners. During this period we also see the growth of a quite new community of Han Chinese who had personal, and often financial, interests in the legitimation of new ways of looking at the international order. Initially many of the opportunities connected with Western trade came through emigration. The great sea-trading routes transported not only goods but people; indeed the so-called 'coolie trade' in which Chinese workers were shipped as bonded labourers from Guangdong to Southeast Asia was one of the scandals of the age, rivalling even the opium trade. Many bonded labourers lived poor and died young in the countries to which they went, but other Chinese from the same places grew wealthy in their adopted homelands. For much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Chinese merchants held immensely profitable concessions to sell opium in Southeast Asia. Many emigrants, and especially those who did well, maintained close links with their families, home villages and counties in China, using them as a source of reliable labour, sometimes sending their children home for their education, and even shifting their place of residence back and forth as the need arose.

The family of Sun Yatsen, the revolutionary who eventually became China's first president, provides a case in point. Sun's father was a small farmer and trader in Xiangshan county just across the mouth of the Pearl River from Hong Kong, and an elder brother emigrated to Hawaii. Sun Yatsen was sent to Hawaii as a child to live with his brother and was

educated at a British-run school there. He then came back home to study at the Western-style medical school in Hong Kong and to marry a local woman. In these situations a new kind of Chinese identity developed that grew out of personal discontent with earlier culturalist ideas, but was also heavily influenced by contact with Western ideas in a variety of forms. The huge number of Chinese who emigrated to Southeast Asia had come into contact with the European colonies that were being formed there. In these new states the culturalist ideas of the immigrants interacted with the racist attitudes of the colonisers, which were gradually being institutionalised during this period. At the same time citizenship of these colonial states allowed the emigrants and their children to return to their home villages under the often convenient protection of foreign extra-territoriality. In this situation they became aware of their Chineseness in a new context of nation and race.

As the Western presence in China expanded, foreign trade also provided employment in China itself. The early years of Tang Jingxing and Wu Tingfang give an idea of the kinds of opportunities that were becoming available. Tang Jingxing, who was born in Xiangshan county in 1832, was educated at Hong Kong mission schools and, on graduation, became an interpreter for the Hong Kong government. Some years later he moved to Shanghai to be an interpreter and clerk in the new Western-run Imperial Maritime Customs. Wu Tingfang was born in Singapore, but his family returned to Guangdong when he was still an infant and his early education took place in the suburbs of Guangzhou in the traditional Chinese style. However at the age of 13, when parents began to make choices about their sons' future careers, he was sent to a missionary school in Hong Kong, and after his graduation became a translator for the Hong Kong police court. Tang Jingxing and Wu Tingfang are famous because of their later achievements: Tang Jingxing became the manager of several of Li Hongzhang's modern-style business enterprises, while Wu Tingfang qualified as a barrister in London and led a distinguished career that included a spell as Chinese ambassador to America. The story of their early lives suggests the kind of new career opportunities that parents in areas close to the treaty ports were seeing and investing in. Employees of Western organisations, emigrants and those who worked within the foreign affairs side of the Qing empire began to understand the attitudes that underpinned Western power. Moreover, the acceptance of at least parts of that ideology was necessary for success in their careers. Western business practices rested on an elaborate ideological foundation that was closely linked to the political structure of the European states and very different from that employed by contemporary Chinese businesses. The compradors who made fortunes acting as the middlemen between Western companies and Chinese society had to understand the ideas of Western company structures and banking. Such understanding was not, however, limited to business practices, but inevitably brought with it new ideas of the role of the state in society.

The new career opportunities related to foreign trade and influence caused parents like those of Tang Jingxing and Wu Tingfang to choose to send their sons to missionary schools. In doing so they accepted that their children would not rise to the highest power in the state through the examination system, and made choices that were intended to enable them to do well financially after a relatively cheap education. The primary aim of this education in the parents' minds was the acquisition of foreign languages for future financial benefit, but for the teachers and school governors the aim was the conversion of the children to Christian belief. Given the children's daily contact with the missionaries it is hardly surprising that some of those who studied in missionary schools did indeed become Christian. The Protestant Christianity many of them accepted, often closely linked in educational institutions to Western science and medicine, put a further barrier between themselves and the culturalist worldview of many of their peers.

The emigrants and men who staffed the Western trading houses and administrations of the treaty ports were joined in their increasing discomfort with culturalist worldviews by men who had built up careers as specialists in foreign affairs for the Qing government. These men were far fewer in number than those who grew wealthy and powerful through the treaty ports, but they tended to have better traditional education and therefore easier contacts with the bureaucracy and with the mainstream of contemporary elite culture. They played a crucial role in spreading new ideas of identity to a wider audience. Yan Fu, who later became famous as a translator, provides a good example of the kind of people who became involved in the government's early modernisation enterprises. Yan Fu had received a good early education, but when he was 14 his father died and the family could no longer afford his schooling so he was sent to take the exams for the new naval school, which charged no fees and gave students a monthly wage. He graduated after five years and in 1877 the government sent him to England to continue his education in naval science at Portsmouth and Greenwich. On his return from England Yan Fu became a teacher at the Jiangnan Arsenal school and then dean of Li Hongzhang's new Beiyang Naval Academy. Yan Fu's original entry into the naval school was by no means an optimal career choice, merely the lesser of several evils in a situation in which his family could not afford to continue his regular education and the new dockyard had been founded nearby. However, by the time Yan Fu was an adult, his heavy investment over many years in the learning of the ocean barbarians meant that the legitimacy and value of that learning had become essential to his own sense of self-worth. For Yan Fu, and an increasingly large number of others like him, culturalism was becoming psychologically unacceptable and a new way of looking at the world had to be found. In their search for this they were to develop that new sense of identity that we know as modern nationalism.

At the same time as the modernisers sought a new sense of identity, they

began to look beyond the Western technical skills so important to the self-strengthening movement to the underlying differences between Chinese and Western culture. The foreign-language element of their education made analyses of the underlying structures of Western ideas possible. To Yan Fu, reading books on political economy in London, it began to seem obvious that the power of the Western nations lay not merely in their weapons but also in the ideologies that underpinned their states. Later, after his return to China, he began to translate some of the works he felt were most important into elaborately beautiful classical Chinese, interspersed, as was the practice in classical Chinese texts, with his own commentaries and explanations. Among the ideas that he felt were most important were those that we now think of under the heading of Social Darwinism. In total contrast to the culturalist view of an eternally expanding moral centre through which barbarians were inevitably drawn towards civilisation, Yan Fu described a world that was at once savage and ruled by the laws of nature, a world in which nation states competed for power and those that failed were wiped out. This was the new world of nation states in its harshest form and in its very violence it appeared to provide an accurate analysis of the expansion of the European empires into the rest of the world. Of all the ideas that Yan Fu translated this was the most influential because it fitted so well with what his readers saw around them.

For men like Yan Fu the increase in the use of Western ideas and the adoption of further Western technologies was in their interest, for with the advance of these ideas they became not merely experts on the foreigners, but experts on government. This was particularly important for them because they were usually under attack for being un-Chinese. Some of the men who had studied abroad longest had adopted Christianity and married Western women. Many returned to their homes wearing strange clothes and hair-styles. Many years later Wu Tingfang explained why he had gone back to wearing Chinese-style clothes after returning from his long period abroad:

That was the Qing dynasty! When students returned from studying abroad, we needn't talk about those who became officials; but even those who did not become officials also grew queues. Otherwise ordinary people would look askance at them, and if they did not call them revolutionaries, then they laughed at them as slaves of the foreigners. Everyone wants respect, so who is willing to be a slave of the foreigners? Everyone wants to live, so who is willing to be a revolutionary when revolutionaries are being strictly suppressed?<sup>5</sup>

There has been considerable discussion over whether men like Wu Tingfang and Yan Fu can be considered nationalist. In his study of Yan Fu, Benjamin Schwartz suggested that nationalism should be defined as a state of mind 'where the commitment to the preservation and advancement of the social entity known as the nation takes priority over the commitment to all other values and beliefs'.<sup>6</sup> Few faced such stark choices, but it is clear that a

new type of Chinese identity, heavily influenced by Western ideas and practices, was beginning to develop among a small but growing group of the population who had close contact with European, American and colonial lifestyles. It is also clear that this group had begun to have a strong interest, both psychologically and financially, in the expansion and legitimation of these new forms of identity.

### *Loss of the tributary states*

It was not, however, until the huge psychological blow of the loss of China's traditional tributary states that new ideas about identity began to spread beyond the small group of men closely involved in the government and in Western trade. The loss of Vietnam and Korea made it immediately obvious that the ideas of culturalism simply did not any longer provide an accurate depiction of the world. Although it was still possible to argue that culturalism described how the world should be, it clearly did not describe how the world actually was.

In 1862 the Vietnamese government signed a treaty ceding part of the country to France and giving France control over its foreign affairs. A further treaty in 1874 effectively made the country a French protectorate, though still independent in name. The Vietnamese government responded to the increase in French power by seeking to strengthen its long-standing ties with China. Vietnam had fought both the Ming and Qing dynasties to prevent excessive Chinese interference, but had usually continued to recognise some role for China in its politics. Now the Vietnamese government continued to send tribute missions to Beijing in an attempt to use China to balance the French. In 1884 the French therefore entered into negotiations with the Qing over Vietnam. This provoked violent dispute within the Qing court between those, led by Li Hongzhang, who was conducting the negotiations, who realised that the Qing armed forces could not resist a French attack, and those purists who emphasised, in true Confucian fashion, the importance of men's spirit rather than weapons. In this situation an agreement was reached by Li Hongzhang and the French ambassador, but Chinese troops on the ground in Vietnam continued to resist and the French took matters into their own hands, moving north from Vietnam up to Fuzhou where they sank the new Chinese fleet and destroyed the newly built Fuzhou Naval Dockyard. After this defeat Li Hongzhang's agreement was accepted and Vietnam was no longer part of the Qing empire.

Ten years later came the loss of Korea. Korea had been among the earliest Manchu conquests and had continued to conduct elaborate tributary relations with the Qing. From the early 1880s there had been considerable dispute in Korea over whether or not to try and modernise the government and if reforms were to be undertaken how much influence either China or Japan should have over them. After court power struggles

with considerable involvement by Chinese and Japanese forces, the Qing had negotiated with the Japanese and both sides had agreed to withdraw their troops. Li Hongzhang, who was based in north China facing the Korean peninsula, then sent the head of his military operations, a young man named Yuan Shikai, to Korea where he dominated court politics for almost 10 years from 1885. It was already becoming clear to those actually involved in the three countries' relations that the formalities of the tribute system were no longer a possibility. Into this tense situation erupted the religiously motivated Tonghak Uprising. Chinese troops were sent to crush the uprising, and Japan took this as a breach of the previous agreement. In the war that followed the Japanese decisively defeated Li Hongzhang's army and navy in 1895. The Qing were forced to agree to Korean independence from China, cede the island of Taiwan to Japan and give Japanese the same kind of treaty rights in China that Westerners had.

The impact of the loss of first Vietnam and then Korea on Chinese ideas about the state was much greater than the previous minimal connection of these territories with the Qing might appear to warrant. This makes sense only if we see that the loss of Vietnam and Korea was the moment at which the culturalist world order was destroyed. For those whose beliefs in culturalism had already been shaken by extensive contact with Western ideas and institutions the result was complete disillusionment with the Qing state. Sun Yatsen, studying in a British medical college in Hong Kong, later dated the start of his revolutionary thought to the Sino-French war and claimed that he organised his first revolutionary uprising in Guangzhou in 1895 shortly after the defeat by the Japanese. But the defeats also began the process of the destruction of the culturalist world order from within. The scholar Kang Youwei, also from the area just around Hong Kong, tried to organise a petition of 1,200 candidates for the highest degree in Beijing to oppose the signing of the 1895 treaty with Japan. Kang Youwei was later to play a crucial role in transforming the nature of Confucian belief from an all-embracing culturalist world order to a much more relativist belief. Indeed he even tried, not very successfully, to make Confucianism into a national religion. While Kang Youwei's own ideas were always considered eccentric, many other scholars at this time began to cast their understanding of Confucianism in relative terms, a process described by Joseph Levenson as the moment of transition from culturalism to nationalism.

### *Exclusion and opposition*

With the destabilising of Confucian ideology and the increasing disillusionment of the treaty-port intellectuals came the beginnings of elite opposition to the dynasty. Both the Confucian scholars and the men of the treaty ports were unhappy at their exclusion from power. The causes of the scholars'

dissatisfaction with the exam system have already been discussed, but the widespread sale of government office to fund the suppression of the Taiping rebellion had exacerbated their feelings of being unfairly treated. The experts on Western affairs, with their knowledge of the sources of Western power, felt that they too were being unfairly excluded from the government. Moreover, their training made it next to impossible for them to succeed in the highly competitive examination system. Yan Fu tried and failed three times to pass even the lowest level of the exams. Men like Yan Fu and Tang Jingxing were sometimes invited into the service of high officials, but were restricted by their lack of examination qualifications to positions as foreign-affairs experts, when they felt that their knowledge should be at the centre of government reforms. Even scholars and regular officials who took up positions relating to foreign affairs tended to find themselves sidelined: one of the problems of the Fuzhou Naval Dockyard was the attempts of its staff to succeed through the regular examination system which distracted them from their jobs.

The events of 1898, known as the Hundred Days' Reforms, pointed up the lack of access of the reformers to the centres of power. In 1898 the young Guangxu emperor should have taken power after the regency of his aunt the Empress Dowager Cixi. The Guangxu emperor was interested in reform and gave audiences to several individuals closely associated with ideas of reform, including Yan Fu and Kang Youwei. In addition he agreed to a variety of proposals for change that went considerably further than the court had yet thought tolerable: the abolition of the formal stylistic criteria hitherto demanded of exam essays, the establishment of schools teaching modern subjects in the provinces, measures designed to stimulate agriculture, industry and commerce, and the use of Western-style drills by the army. He also called for the abolition of many government sinecures, though this seems to have been more of a personal crusade for frugality in government. These proposals were not radical: complaints about the essay style required in the exams had been made since at least the eighteenth century. However, for reasons that are not fully understood but may have related to fears of a Western-backed coup, the regent Cixi lost her nerve over the process and resumed personal power, banishing the emperor to part of the Summer Palace and executing several supporters of Kang Youwei. Kang and his disciple Liang Qichao fled to Japan.

In the events of 1898 we see the beginnings of the alliance between the scholarly elite and the experts on Western affairs that was eventually to overthrow the Qing. In large part their hostility towards the government must be put down to resentment at their exclusion from power. However the loss of Korea and Vietnam, which shattered the culturalism of many of the scholarly elite, also opened the way for extending new ideas about identity and the nature of the state to a much wider audience.

## The Boxer Uprising

So far we have looked at the response of China's political elite and the population of the treaty ports to the Western presence in China, but in order to understand the development of Chinese nationalism it is also necessary to consider popular attitudes. This is difficult because most people did not leave written records, let alone accounts of their opinions on international relations. However, the Boxer Uprising of 1900, when all over the north China countryside groups of villagers burned down churches and murdered their Catholic neighbours, was a moment when many people acted out their attitudes and sense of identity. The feelings that gave rise to such tragedies were greatly exaggerated by a severe drought and the political tensions at court, but it is possible to use the uprising to try and understand how popular views about Chinese identity were changing as a result of the Western presence.

Across rural north China Boxer groups began with young men assembling, usually in temples, and taking part in a strange new form of martial art in which they were possessed by spirits. A schoolteacher in rural Shanxi described a gathering of the Boxers in his area:

In the autumn in the 7th month they gathered in great numbers at Jinci Temple, each holding a weapon and wearing a red head cloth, a red belt and a red scarf. They arrived in small groups, entered the temple of the Wutian God and when they had worshipped the god they paid their respects to the leader. The leader and his supporters acted as if they were drunk. Whenever there were several tens of thousands gathered, half adults and half children, they lined up and left, with two red flags carried in front of them bearing the words 'Support the Qing and destroy the foreigners; implement the Way on behalf of Heaven'. They did not disperse till the 8th month.

He goes on to describe some of the activities of another local Boxer group:

On the 23rd of the 6th month the leader took his supporters to Sanxian village to attack the Catholics. There were a lot of Catholics in Sanxian, more than in other places, and the church was really magnificent. Many Catholics from neighbouring counties had taken refuge there and they defended the church strongly so that no one could take it. But the man known as His Honour Guan was passionate and determined. He repeated his attacks all day and he himself led from the front, climbing up the wall of the church compound where he was shot and fell, though not seriously enough to die. His supporters were bitterly angry and pushed the attack with all their force and on the third day they broke through. Then they massacred all the Catholics, men, women and children, killing several hundred people in total and leaving no survivors. All the church buildings were burned



down. The Boxer leader died of his injuries ten days later and three of his supporters were killed. At the beginning of the 7th month they scattered.<sup>7</sup>

There were very few foreigners in Shanxi and the neighbouring province of Inner Mongolia, about 140 all told, and almost all of them were killed during the uprising. A Christian who had escaped to Shanghai reported how two of them had died. Miss Whitchurch and Miss Sewell were missionaries stationed in a remote rural county. A crowd of Boxers came to their house and the two women sent a message to the magistrate asking him to disperse the crowd. He came and told them that his soldiers were to protect the Chinese, not them. After he left the crowd looted the house, stripped the women and beat them to death. Catholic communities had existed in Shanxi since the eighteenth century and Miss Whitchurch and Miss Sewell do not seem to have been an immediate threat to the local community. Why were these people so suddenly and savagely murdered? The reasons can be summed up as long-standing tensions with Catholics in village communities, fear of Western power, and the interaction in 1900 between a severe drought and high-court politics. In each of these factors the shifting relationship between cultural identity and national politics played an important role.

### *Christianity as a threat to the social order*

In order to understand the problems Catholics posed in the villages we need to understand the nature of the relation between the Qing state and local communities, which was closely linked to the culturalist view of the world order. Late Qing magistrates governed large and populous counties with little administrative or military support. Direct state intervention in the villages was limited to the resolution of legal cases and the exaction of taxes. For the rest of the time the magistrates were dependent on local structures that drew their legitimacy from the state. Rural communities were organised by local leaders and power structures, such as crop watching or irrigation networks, legitimated through religious rituals. The leaders of an irrigation network might meet and feast in the temple of a local god, use the temple to store the stone steles on which the magistrate's legal decisions that confirmed their power were inscribed, and hold an annual festival with opera for the enjoyment of the god and local villagers. In order to do all these things local leaders had the right to levy money from the villagers, usually on the basis of the amount of land owned, and this right increased their power. This religiously based network was linked to the religious activities of the magistrate and the higher levels of the state. Thus the worship of local deities legitimated state power, while at the same time the state's rituals and beliefs legitimated the village social order.

However, during the late nineteenth century the new vision of the world order brought by the foreign powers gradually began to affect this social structure. In areas remote from the treaty ports, one of the most important ways in which this happened was change in the status of Christian communities and foreign missionaries. After the Treaty of Tianjin, which granted freedom of religious belief to Christians, some Christians began to refuse to pay village levies on the grounds that they were used to fund non-Christian religious rituals. Local leaders reacted angrily. In one Shanxi village when a Catholic called Li Xiangtai refused to pay the village levy, the village head, a man called Blind Cat Chang, took a hundred people to Li's home in the middle of the night, broke down the door and dragged Li to the temple, where he tried to force him to agree to pay a fine of 100,000 copper cash for temple repairs and an opera. When Li refused to hand over the money Blind Cat Chang had the Li family's 40 fruit trees cut down and sold. After that he cut down the fruit trees of anyone who was Catholic. All the parties in this dispute eventually appealed to the local magistrate, who supported the village head. This was, and continued to be, quite a common response despite the new treaty provisions. Magistrates worked, for the most part, not with a codified legal system but with commonly shared ideas of justice and morality. In the opinion of many magistrates Christianity was a heterodox religion and Christians were fortunate not to be punished for holding it; they certainly should not benefit from it. Magistrates were aware that to acquiesce to Catholic demands would strike at the legitimacy of the symbolic ties between local communities and the state.

In their judgements magistrates reformulated what had come to them as disputes over village power structures in broader, national terms. Thus the magistrate who examined Li Xiangtai asked, 'Why do you not act according to the ways of your former local temple?' To this Li replied, 'The church clearly bans this, so I now follow the temple [only] in matters concerning the public good.' The magistrate, seeing the power of the state threatened by the structures of the Catholic church, was furious at this reply and ordered Li to obey the temple organisation. Later he asked Li, 'Why do you people not respect the teachings of this country, but perversely believe in the heterodox teachings of the French religion?'<sup>8</sup> Here Christianity is explicitly linked to obedience to a foreign power.

In a similar Shanxi case in 1881 the magistrate asked Catholic church member Yang, 'You are a person of what country?' Yang replied, 'I am a person of the Qing.' To which the magistrate responded,

If you are a person of the Qing dynasty then why are you following the foreign devils and their seditious religion? You didn't pay your opera money requested by the village and you were beaten. But how can you dare to bring a suit? Don't you know why Zuo Zongtang went to Beijing? In order to kill – to exterminate – the foreign devils. You certainly ought to pay the opera subscription. If you don't you won't

be allowed to live in the land of the Qing. You'll have to leave for a foreign country.<sup>9</sup>

The term used for both 'country' and 'dynasty' in this dialogue is *guo*, and the text shows how the use of this word was shifting: Yang replies that he is a subject of the Qing dynasty, while the magistrate refers to a choice between countries. The magistrate assumes a necessary association between local religious practice and nationality in a world of nation states. In other words, problems with cultural practices at the village level are beginning to be associated with political problems between the Qing and the foreign powers.

### *Fear of Western power*

During this period knowledge of Western scientific and military power was also gradually spreading beyond the areas of direct Western influence. Imported arms were now in use by Chinese armies and were known to be extremely effective. But for many ordinary people the power of Westerners was exemplified in the work of Western doctors. Western techniques of surgery were rightly perceived as being dangerous, but powerful. A British doctor working in Shanxi in the 1880s found that many patients with eye problems came to him because of stories of the success of cataract operations. One woman of 47 who was completely cured had been dismissed from her job as a servant when she became blind and had twice attempted to drown herself in despair at her situation. With success stories of this kind it was not surprising that Chinese fraudsters and quacks were soon selling medicines they claimed they had acquired from the Westerners. However, almost all Western doctors were medical missionaries, and medical treatment was accompanied by fervent prayer and exhortations to the patient to thank the Christian god. For many people Western technology came to be associated with magic and ritual.

Western power was also understood in terms of magic and ritual because these were the terms commonly used by ordinary people to make sense of the incomprehensible. For many people Westerners were quintessentially other and strange, and therefore both frightening and potentially powerful. A jingle recorded in 1900 ran:

The women are not chaste, the men are not worthy,  
The devils are not the fruit of men.  
If you don't believe, please look carefully,  
The devils' eyeballs emit blue light.<sup>10</sup>

Such ideas led to accusations of alien behaviour which took the form of the inversion of key Chinese ideas about the proper ordering of society. Westerners were regularly accused of not respecting familial relationships,

and particularly of mother–son incest, the inversion of the primary Confucian relation of filial piety. When there was a serious drought in 1900, it was thought that this kind of immoral behaviour was disturbing the cosmos. A text posted in many places in Tianjin read:

On account of the Protestant and Catholic religions the Buddhist gods are oppressed, and our sages thrust into the background. The law of Buddha is no longer respected, and the five relationships between monarch and minister, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brothers, and friends are disregarded. The anger of Heaven and Earth has been withheld from us. But Heaven is now sending down eight millions of spiritual soldiers to extirpate these foreign religions, and when this has been done there will be timely rain.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, it was being suggested to people that the inversion of moral behaviour practised by the Westerners was the primary cause of the serious drought, and only if the Westerners were exterminated would the drought be ended. Such attitudes associated the Westerners with power, but understood that power in terms of the earlier cultural order.

Fear of the power of Western technology combined with long-standing Chinese fears of the mutilation of the body to produce accusations that Western power was based on the removal of organs from Chinese bodies. In 1900 two Catholic nuns near Tianjin were killed by a crowd after rumours that they kidnapped children and then turned them over to church members to gouge out their hearts. A pamphlet distributed throughout Shanxi as a sort of chain letter said that foreign vessels seized at the coast had been found to contain quantities of human blood, eyes and nipples. The famous writer Lu Xun remembered how in the 1890s in his home village everybody, old and young, talked about how the foreign devils gouged out eyeballs to use in electricity and photography. He even remembered hearing an old lady explain that the reason the Westerners gouged out hearts was to melt down the fat into oil for lamps to go beneath the earth and find treasure, which was why foreigners were so rich. Boxer magic and spirit possession provided a solution to these kinds of magical and spiritual power. The widespread nature of these beliefs is indicated by the fact that even in the south of the country, where for political reasons provincial governments strictly suppressed the movement, churches were attacked, Christian property was burnt and there were rumours of foreign defeats by Boxer forces.

Fear of the foreigners was exacerbated in 1900 by the threat of drought. Across north China no rain fell in the planting season that year. This left farmers unemployed, with no crops to care for, deeply anxious and with time on their hands. As grain prices began to rise steeply the farmers stopped spending money and the crisis began to hit rural industries and country towns. Almost all adults could remember the drought of 1877 and 1878 and the famine that had followed. In those years men had sold their

wives and even their children and still died of starvation, and many more had had to leave their homes as destitute refugees in a society where destitution almost always meant death. Drought was a fearsome thing. In 1900 people were already saying, 'more than half the people will die' or 'in the great catastrophe seven out of ten will die'.<sup>12</sup> There were rumours that only those who cooperated with the Boxers would escape. Drought exacerbated tensions with Christians, because it was seen as a punishment for immorality and prayers for rain required the sincere and public participation of the whole community. The magical techniques of the Westerners also came under scrutiny and rumours spread that they were preventing the rain not only by their immorality but also, for example, by standing naked on the roofs of their houses fanning back the clouds.

### *Influence of court politics*

High politics also played an important role in enabling and legitimating the violence. The Chinese today refer to the events of 1900 not as the Boxer Uprising but as the Invasion of the Eight Allied Armies. In doing so they focus attention not on the rural attacks on foreigners and Catholics that took place in the first part of the year, but on the Qing declaration of war against the foreign powers in the summer. This declaration of war legitimated the Boxers' anti-foreign activities and thus expanded their scope, but it also altered their nature.

Support for religiously inspired rural militias did not come naturally to a government that had been putting down such rebellions for half a century. The first response of the county and provincial authorities faced with the mass murder of Catholic villagers, or Boxer troops demanding to be fed at government expense, was to try to disperse the Boxer forces, distinguish the leaders from those who had been drawn into the trouble against their better judgement, execute the troublemakers and send the others back to their homes. But these responses were countered by considerable support within the government both for the Boxers' aims of punishing heterodox religion and for using popular militias to fight the Western powers, an idea that still had a hold over the imaginations of a certain faction within the court. The result of these opposing forces within the court was that the central government vacillated and pursued contradictory policies. Yuan Shikai, the governor of Shandong province, conducted a strong campaign against Boxer groups and succeeded in preventing serious outbreaks; but the court also issued an announcement that people drilling for self-defence were not to be considered to be bandits, thus strengthening the hand of local officials who did not want to suppress Boxer groups.

Meanwhile, the Western community in the treaty ports succeeded in persuading the governments of the eight major foreign powers to announce a military expedition against Beijing. In the face of this threat the debate at

court swung in favour of those who hoped to use the Boxers to drive out the foreign powers, and the court declared war on all the foreign powers simultaneously. The declaration of war instantly changed the potential costs of participation in Boxer groups, which had previously verged on the heterodox. Troops carried banners proclaiming 'United in harmony troop by imperial decree' or 'The righteous people by imperial decree; protect the Qing and destroy the foreigners!' Groups of Boxers began to gather in Beijing and Tianjin and fought alongside the imperial army in the siege of the foreign legations in Beijing and the foreign concessions in Tianjin. Fig. 3.2 is a contemporary populist depiction of the successes of the Boxer troops in an official military context. The text at the top of the picture tells how three generals in the Qing army ordered 5,000 Boxers to fight in the front line against the foreign troops. The illustration depicts the Boxers, with bare chests and legs and ferocious expressions, bringing the foreign soldiers they have captured to the Qing generals. In the background two soldiers from the regular army fire a cannon that appears to have sunk at least two of the foreign ships. In this context the Boxers are seen as integrated into the war declared by the court. However despite the declaration of war, there was still considerable dissension within the court, and high officials in the centre and south of the country concluded non-involvement pacts with the Western powers.

We should not imagine that because the Boxer movement was fed by rumours of mutilation and belief in the power of spirit possession, its participants were unaware of court politics. There were rumours that Li Hongzhang, who had negotiated the treaty that ceded Korea and Taiwan to Japan in 1895, had married his son to the daughter of the Japanese emperor, and a jingle heard in Shandong accused him of betraying the country. Similar stories and jingles had circulated a couple of years earlier about leading reformers, who were also unpopular: Kang Youwei, it was said, had been made into a saint by the foreign powers and the Guangxu emperor was accused of having converted to Christianity. Ordinary people were aware of the major trends and events of national politics and acted at least in part in response to them.

But it is clear from Boxer actions that the Western-inspired nationalism of the reformers was still alien to much of the population. In Beijing Boxers burnt down the Sino-Western Primary School established by the government. There was even a rumour that after the Christians were dead all students who read foreign books would be killed. Liang Shuming, a 7-year-old who had been sent to receive a Western-style education by his father, an official interested in Western reforms, was so frightened that he burnt all his English textbooks. A poster that circulated in the name of the Jade Emperor, an important folk deity, read: 'They spread heterodox religion everywhere, erect telegraph poles, build railways, don't believe in the teachings of the sages, profane the gods; their crimes are uncountable. I am exceedingly angry and will send forth great thunder.'<sup>13</sup>

*Image Not Available*

**Figure 3.2** 'Qing troops victorious over the foreigners with the aid of the Boxers'  
Source: British Museum

Across north China telegraph poles and railways were destroyed even as the foreign armies moved inland towards Beijing. Telegraph poles and railways had been promoted by the central government for the very purpose of repelling foreign invasion; they were rejected by a population whose sense of national identity was still closely linked to traditional culturalist ideas.

Popular opposition to the reform plans of the modern nationalists was exacerbated by the indemnity which the foreign powers imposed on China in the aftermath of the crisis. The foreign armies could not ultimately be defeated by the untrained Boxers or the troops of a government that was still vacillating in its response. They moved slowly inland, relieved the siege of the legations, took control of the city of Beijing, sacked the emperor's Summer Palace and blew up sections of the city wall. The emperor and the empress dowager fled west through Shanxi to Xian. Gradually news began to come through from the inland provinces, horrific stories of their flight told by the few foreigners who had escaped and bitter reports of the deaths of many others coming from Chinese converts. Some of the stories were so appalling that the missionary societies were actually accused in the treaty-port press of suppressing them in order to save people's feelings. Negotiations took place in an atmosphere of horror and rage and the peace settlement that resulted from them was punitive in the extreme. Its main features were the payment of a huge indemnity, which was still to be draining China's resources in the 1920s, and the punishment of all participants. The indemnity was to be raised initially mostly from the poor, drought-stricken counties of north China which had been at the heart of the uprising. The result was famine the following year. Punishment was to be meted out both to high officials who had supported the declaration of war and to the ordinary people who had joined Boxer groups. Meanwhile Christians who had lost property or livelihood during the uprising were to be recompensed, at just the same moment that their non-Christian neighbours were being fined and punished.

The Boxer settlement proved to the subjects of the Qing that the dynasty was now under foreign control. Hardly surprisingly there was considerable resistance to its implementation. In at least one part of Zhili there was a further uprising in which a county magistrate and several Qing soldiers were killed. The news of this uprising aroused strong feelings in neighbouring areas where many people shared with the rebels a strong sense of the basic rightness of the Boxer movement. One rural commentator wrote:

They have sent soldiers to oppress it and also told the local officials to implement the protection of foreigners and Christians. Now the uprising was caused entirely by those same foreigners' and Christians' extortion from the ordinary people, which the officials could not stop. And yet when the ordinary people oppose the priests of the foreign



religion they are labelled rebels, and soldiers are used to suppress them: people's hearts do not agree to it, and even though there are incidents in which they kill officials or kill soldiers, they forgive them on several points. I fear that everyone in Zhili province will become a rebel.<sup>14</sup>

The outcome of the settlement was greatly increased opposition to the Qing dynasty, which was seen as having capitulated to the Western powers. The defeat was also associated with the reformers because the foreign governments had required that many of the most radical opponents of reform be executed and it was the reformers who now came to power and had the task of extracting the indemnity. Thus there was also a strong sense of antagonism towards those modern nationalists who, as promoters of westernising reforms, were seen as being in collaboration with the foreign powers.

## Conclusion

The Western model of a world of independent states and international trade was in itself a threat to Chinese ideas of identity that were bound up with particular views of the position of the Chinese state in the world. In a court dominated by factional politics it was inevitable that these issues of identity would come to be affiliated with certain groups within the government. Paradoxically, during the course of the second half of the nineteenth century, contact with the West had the effect of strengthening the power of those within the government who were most committed to the idea of a culturalist world order. This took place at the same time that an increasingly powerful and wealthy class was developing in the treaty ports, which were beginning to act as a conduit for Western ideas of nationhood. The political tension between these two powerful lobbies set the stage for the disastrous Boxer Uprising of 1900. Much Western writing has depicted the Boxers as emblems of xenophobia. The fantastic rumours, the deaths of foreign missionaries and their children, the massacres of Catholics have all contributed to this picture. However the image of ignorant xenophobia underplays the awareness of high-level politics displayed by participants in the Boxer Uprising. Instead, I would argue that the widespread popular participation in the Boxer Uprising suggests the power of what Hobsbawm and others have referred to as 'proto-nationalism', and also the extent to which it differed from modern nationalism. Popular proto-nationalism of the late nineteenth century was not ignorant xenophobia; it was strongly opposed to foreign interference in China, which was relatively well known and understood. However, it differed from modern nationalism in that it was also radically opposed to the institutions of the modern state, which lay at the heart of modern nationalism.