

Qing Dynasty

Qīng Cháo 清朝

1644–1912 (*dynasty overthrown 1911, last emperor abdicated 1912*)

The Qing dynasty, founded in 1644 by the Manchus, was the final imperial dynasty to rule China. The last emperor abdicated in 1912 following the dynasty's overthrow by the Republican revolution of 1911. Over a period of 268 years, the Qing built the largest consolidated empire in China's history and oversaw great changes in governmental administration, economic growth, regional integration, and intellectual achievement.

The Manchus, the founders of China's last imperial dynasty, the Qing (1644–1912), were descendants of the Jurchen people of north China, who ruled the region as the Jurchen Jin dynasty (1125–1234). Behind the leadership of Nurhachi (1559–1626), the various Jurchen tribes organized into large feudal and military units called banners. In 1616 Nurhachi established a dynasty that he called the Hou (Later) Jin, using the Chinese political concept of *tianming* (Mandate of Heaven) as his right to rule. Hongtaiji (or Abahai, 1592–1643), Nurhachi's successor, continued to copy Chinese customs and changed the name of his people from Jurchen to Manchu in 1635 and the dynastic name from Hou Jin to Qing in 1636.

Manchu emperor Shunzhi (1638–1661, reigned 1644–1661), who was guided by his uncle, the imperial regent Dorgon (1612–1650), entered Beijing in 1644 and crushed the rebellion that had recently overthrown the reigning Ming

dynasty (1368–1644). The Qing conquerors also crushed the Southern Ming resistance and recruited the Han Chinese elite into the new Manchu government. Although the Manchu tried to repress antiforeign feelings among the conquered Han Chinese, they based their empire on

Woman dressed in Qing dynasty style, in Changde. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.



1832



Painting of new foreign factories being built in China toward the end of the Qing dynasty. Attributed to Tin Qua, c. 1855. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

the Chinese model. This plan for governing included Confucianism as the official state doctrine; administrative offices, such as the grand secretariat and six ministries; and a system of taxation. The new Qing government was ruled jointly by Manchu and Chinese. Equal numbers of Manchu and Chinese held office and worked side by side.

The next three Qing emperors—Kangxi (1654–1722, reigned 1662–1722), Yongzheng (1678–1735, reigned 1723–1735), and Qianlong (1711–1799, reigned 1735–1795)—guided the dynasty to the heights of its power and prosperity and built the largest empire in the world. Following its conquest of greater China, the Qing seized Taiwan in 1683, Outer Mongolia in the 1690s, Tibet in 1720, and Xinjiang in 1759. Beyond China proper, the Qing exacted tribute from Burma (present-day Myanmar), Annam (in present-day Vietnam), and Korea. As governors of their country, these three emperors strove to be model Confucian rulers.

During the eighteenth century, imperial authority became more concentrated through governing bodies like the Grand Council, which was established in 1729. An active bureaucracy enabled the emperor to manage all important government matters efficiently. The minority regions were brought under the control of the central government. Emperor Qianlong continued the policy of limited foreign contact. In 1760 he established the so-called Canton system, which restricted foreign trade to Pearl River delta ports in the area around Guangzhou (Canton).

Nineteenth-Century Changes

Events of the nineteenth century brought tremendous change to the Qing and to the whole system of imperial government in China.

In the 1840s foreign imperialist powers were granted political, economic, and legal privileges in certain Chinese



A domesticated water buffalo pulls a harrow in one of a series of forty-six paintings on farm life commissioned by the emperor. Ink and color on silk; after Qiao Ping-chen (c.1650–1726).

coastal cities, known as treaty ports. During the 1850s the Qing faced large-scale popular uprisings across the empire, including the Nian rebellion (1853–1868) in the east, the Muslim rebellion (1855–1873) in Yunnan, and the Taiping rebellion (1851–1864). These and other smaller rebellions led to a shift in power from the Manchu central government to members of the powerful provincial Chinese elite, who often led their own regional armies against the peasant rebels.

To revive the dynasty, Qing leaders established a number of programs to modernize the country. The *yangwu yundong* (self-strengthening movement) was implemented during the reigns of Tongzhi (1856–1875, reigned 1862–1874) and Guangxu (1871–1908, reigned 1875–1908), who were both directed by Tongzhi's mother, Cixi (1835–1898), from behind a silk screen at court. The principle of *zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong* (Chinese learning as the essence and Western learning as a practical tool) was further applied to modern industrial development. Led by Li Hongzhang (1823–1901), the program included building arsenals, machine factories, schools, railways, shipyards,

telegraph lines, a postal service, and a modern army, navy, and press.

Although the self-strengthening movement helped to somewhat modernize the nation, it could not make the Qing powerful enough to fight off foreign imperialist interests. China lost Vietnam to France in the Sino-French war of 1884–1885. China surrendered Macao to Portugal in 1887. And China was forced by its defeat to Japan in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 to recognize Korean independence and to concede Taiwan to Japan. Other foreign powers began to compete for concessions (areas of land that were leased in perpetuity by foreign governments) in China.

Fearing the splitting apart of the country, Chinese from various social strata launched new social movements. In 1898 a group of intellectuals persuaded Emperor Guangxu to call for reform. Known as the Hundred Days of Reform, the movement called for sweeping changes in education, political administration, industry and commerce, and foreign relations. The reform movement, however, failed mainly because it was opposed by the powerful and conservative Empress Dowager Cixi.

Twentieth-Century Changes

During the first decade of the twentieth century, the Qing court enacted even more radical reforms in an effort to save the dynasty. In 1905 the civil-service examination system was abolished. Thousands of Chinese students went to study abroad. The government was restructured. And legal institutions were modified along modern precepts.

Meanwhile, foreign interventions in north China triggered a violent backlash known as the Boxer Rebellion (1900). In the late 1890s, a secret society called the Boxers United in Righteousness focused its frustration and anger on Christian converts and foreign interests—such as churches, railways, and mines—which the Boxers blamed for much of the misery in people's lives. In 1900, with the support of the Qing court, the Boxers attacked foreign government offices in Beijing. Although popular with and bolstered by the people, the siege was broken by a military alliance of eight countries. The foreign powers forced the Qing to pay huge compensation and to accept the establishment of foreign military posts in Beijing. China at this time hung on to its sovereignty by a thin thread.

The Qing's failure to deal with foreign aggression stimulated Han Chinese nationalism. The political tract *Geming jun* (The Revolutionary Army), written by anti-Manchu radical Zou Rong in 1903, called on the Chinese to overturn Manchu rule and seize their own destiny. The nationalists, led by Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), considered the father of modern China, sought revolution to solve China's problems. Guided by his Three Principles of the People—nationalism, democracy, and people's livelihood—Sun mobilized various groups, such as secret-society members and overseas students. In 1905 he combined his organization with other Chinese radical groups and founded the *Tongmeng hui* (Revolutionary Alliance), which directed the revolution.

In 1908 the Qing government issued the *Xianfa da-gang* (Outline of Constitution), which introduced constitutional monarchy to China and defined the rights and responsibilities of the people. In 1909 the government opened provincial assemblies and in 1910, a consultative national assembly. But these desperate reform efforts failed to satisfy the revolutionaries. The Republic of China was founded following the 1911 Revolution. The dynastic era in China officially closed when the last Qing emperor, Xuantong (1906–1967, reigned 1909–1912), abdicated on 12 February 1912.

Socioeconomic Changes

The Qing empire contributed to significant changes in Chinese society, in particular an intensive cultural integration of different peoples. The peoples of Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and other regions were incorporated into the Chinese nation but enjoyed considerable political and cultural autonomy. Even so, the Qing sought to preserve their ethnic character.

Ethnic Manchu were granted preferential political, legal, and social treatment and were encouraged to retain their native arts, including archery and horsemanship. Military units made up entirely of Manchu, the banners, were stationed across the empire. Manchuria was maintained as a homeland base from which Han Chinese were excluded. Manchu women were forbidden to engage in the Chinese practice of foot binding. Han Chinese males were forced to shave the front of their heads and to wear a long braid in the back in the Manchu style, which

expressed political loyalty. Marriage between Manchu and Chinese was prohibited.

At the same time, to build a Confucian empire, the Manchu rulers created a policy of sinicization, adopting Chinese values, institutions, cultural practices, and social customs. The Qing court encouraged the ruling elite, including the Han Chinese, to receive a Manchu-style education and to master the Manchurian language.

The economy thrived under the Qing. By the late eighteenth century, agricultural production had increased because of an increase in arable land, the cultivation of new crops from the Americas, and the use of improved seeds, fertilizers, and farming techniques.

Qing tax policy facilitated agricultural and economic development. In 1713 Emperor Kangxi permanently fixed the number of taxpayers, exempting the increased population from taxation. Emperor Yongzhen instituted reforms in which taxes were based on land and collected in silver, which greatly benefited poor peasant farmers. The textile, porcelain, paper, sugar, mining, and metalworking industries flourished. Efficient transportation networks

A child fans the fire as cocoons boil in a caldron. In order to be drawn as silk, the cocoons must first be cooked. Ink and color on silk; after Qiao Ping-chen (c.1650–1726).



and an effective banking system helped spur domestic trade and develop a thriving market across the empire and beyond. China traded with Japan, Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America. Foreign trade grew rapidly in China's favor, and the country prospered. By the early nineteenth century, China's prosperity reflected the most dynamic economy in the preindustrial world.

Foreign encroachment following the First Opium War (1839–1842) changed Qing economic and social structures, especially in the coastal areas. Enormous war indemnities drained the treasury. Foreigners held the important posts in the customs service. Foreign factories, railways, and banks dominated industry and commerce. Independent foreign communities built from the concessions in the treaty ports sprang up within Chinese society. Yet because of—or in some cases, in spite of—the introduction of foreign values and technology, the late Qing launched China's modern enterprises, whether they were operated by the government or private Chinese entrepreneurs. Arms manufacturing, shipping, textiles, communications, mining, machinery manufacturing, and banking succeeded and transformed business patterns and the social fabric along the coast. The more traditional interior sections of the country remained mostly unchanged.

Along with changes in the economic structure came changes in the social order. Modern cities developed. Shanghai grew into the largest city in China and an important economic center of East Asia. In the treaty ports, the Chinese commercial class—entrepreneurs or *compradores* (merchants working for foreign firms)—adopted Western modes of life and ideas. Western-style education, in both China and abroad, trained a new class of people who challenged the supremacy of the old educated elite. Laborers who migrated overseas built economic and social connections in their adopted countries that stretched back to the mother country. A new military establishment, trained in Western methods and better equipped than the old imperial army, began to play an important role in Qing politics. “New women,” epitomized by the revolutionary Qiu Jin (1875–1907), appeared. They unbound their feet, joined sisterhoods, obtained educations, and took part in public life. By 1909 some thirteen thousand girls were attending schools in China and several hundred more were studying abroad. These new social elements, along with a growing discontent among the peasants from

the countryside, overwhelmed the old order and helped topple the Qing regime.

Cultural and Intellectual Changes

The Qing era marked a time of cultural flowering and intellectual searching. In the early years of the dynasty, the Manchu endeavored to reconstruct a world order based on neo-Confucianism. To control the intellectuals and the spread of knowledge, the state sponsored literary projects, including the *Gujin tushu jicheng* (Synthesis of Books and Illustrations Past and Present, 1726–1728) and the *Siku quanshu* (Complete Library of the Four Treasuries, 1772–1782).

Despite the government's repressive policy, the intellectuals continued to produce great ideas and literary works. Many scholars devoted themselves to a literary work called the evidential research movement. This monumental work contributed immensely to critical studies of Chinese history, philosophy, and linguistics. Philosophers such as Huang Zongxi (1610–1695), Gu Yanwu (1613–1682), and Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692) searched for new meanings of life. Finely crafted works such as *Liaozhai zhiyi* (Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio) by Pu Songling (1640–1715), *Rulin waishi* (The Scholars) by Wu Jingzi (1701–1754), and *Honglou meng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*) by Cao Xueqin (d. 1763) exposed social problems.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Catholic and Protestant missionaries brought Western science, technology, medicine, education—and religion—to China. At times the Chinese forcibly opposed the missionaries and their ideas. For example, in 1704 Emperor Kangxi expelled a number of missionaries who were intolerant of Chinese culture. The Tianjin Massacre of 1870 and the Boxer Rebellion were demonstrations against Christian missions in China. Nevertheless, by the end of the nineteenth century, some 750 Catholic and 1,300 Protestant missionaries were serving in China. They converted about 200,000 Chinese to Christianity.

Foreign aggression after the Opium War impelled the Qing court to examine Western ideas for enriching the country and strengthening the military. Wei Yuan (1794–1856), in his famous *Haiguo tuzhi* (Illustrated Treatise on

Overseas Countries), advocated using the foreigners' own methods to depose them. The Qing Self-Strengthening Movement adapted Western values and applied modern science and technology. Yan Fu (1854–1921), who studied naval sciences in England, translated the works of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, and Adam Smith. The movement toward modern nationalism, furthered by Sun Yat-sen and his revolutionary followers, became yet another force that helped destroy the old imperial order.

The Qing dynasty commands a significant position in the history of China. During its long reign, the dynasty dealt with many difficulties and disasters from within and outside of China. Yet the Qing left a distinctive legacy of territorial, political, demographic, economic, and intellectual influence that continues to affect present-day China.

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Further Reading

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The trees want to remain quiet,
but the wind will not stop.

树欲静而风不止

Shù yù jìng'ér fēng bù zhǐ.