

China and Japan

CHAPTER 25

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As with the rest of the globe, the European presence in East Asia increased dramatically from the late 1700s through the early 1900s. The major states there, China and Japan, reacted to this development in different ways.

Famously, Napoleon Bonaparte referred to China as a sleeping dragon. By that, he meant that with its huge population, vast size, and rich resources, China had the potential to become one of the world's mightiest nations. However, under the rule of the Qing (Manchu) emperors, China continued to slumber, and its power decreased rather than increased. Deluded by a sense of its own grandeur, based on past accomplishments and old traditions, the Qing leadership did little to modernize or industrialize. This backwardness left it vulnerable, and, during the 1800s, China suffered repeated defeats at the hands of Western powers. Although China was not actually conquered and colonized, it was forced to grant so many privileges and economic concessions to outside powers that its integrity as an independent nation was compromised. The Qing state weakened internally in the late 1800s and collapsed in 1911.

By contrast, Japan responded effectively to the challenge posed by the West. When the United States and the nations of Europe forced its markets open to the world in the 1850s, Japan chose to learn from them. From 1868 onward, under new leadership, the Japanese modernized, industrialized, and militarized. They preserved their independence. By the 1890s and early 1900s, Japan was itself an imperial power, expanding its sphere of influence in East Asia. As several wars during these years proved, Japan became the first non-Western nation in the modern era capable of rivaling Europe and America in military ability and strength.

QING (MANCHU) CHINA IN DECLINE

The Peak of the Qing Dynasty

The Qing, or Manchu, rulers who had conquered China from the north in 1644 had been mighty, ruthless leaders. The dynasty's peak, however, had been the long reign of Kangxi (1662–1722). Emperor **Qianlong** (1736–1795) was the Qing's last strong, competent ruler.

During the last half of the 1700s, Qianlong defended China's long borders, kept the empire's far-flung regions under control, improved economic growth, and sponsored art and learning. During his reign, one of the greatest novels in Chinese literary history appeared: Cao Xuequin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1791), which narrates the tragedy of two young lovers caught up in the decline of a wealthy and powerful clan.

Internal Decline of the Qing

Unfortunately for the Qing, several negative trends weakened China after Qianlong's death. The quality of leadership steeply declined, as weak, incompetent emperors took the throne.

More widely, the government became riddled with corruption. The cost of maintaining border defenses along the northern and western frontiers became increasingly burdensome. The economy worsened, and population growth was too rapid (China had 300 million people at the beginning of the century, and 400 million by the end). Popular discontent with the Qing and bad economic conditions broke out into open revolt several times. One such occasion was the White Lotus Rebellion (1796–1804), which took years for the authorities to suppress.

Chinese Foreign Trade Before the 1830s

At the same time, an external problem made itself felt: increased economic and diplomatic pressure from the West, particularly from Britain. As late as the 1810s, the Chinese had the upper hand in their relationship with the West. China was too strong to conquer, and it enjoyed an enormous advantage in its balance of trade.

Europeans could trade with China only in a small number of designated ports and cities (including Kiakhta in the north and **Canton** on the southern coast). The Chinese accepted only a tiny selection of Western goods in trade. In return, they sold the nations of the West silk and porcelain. The most profitable commodity was **tea**, which the Chinese sold in immense quantities to the outside world, especially Russia and Britain. In exchange, the West paid China vast amounts of silver bullion.

For years, Westerners complained about these conditions and requested the Chinese to let them sell more goods in China. In 1793, a British delegation led by Lord Macartney made such a request, but it was denied. Famously, Macartney, in order to meet the Emperor Qianlong, was compelled to lower himself onto one knee, and he was referred to by the Chinese not as an ambassador, but as a tribute-bearer. When Macartney asked that the British be allowed to sell more of their goods to China, Qianlong replied, "Your country has nothing we need." In 1816, a similar mission under Lord Amherst received much the same response.



Tea Harvesting in China.

For hundreds of years, silk, then porcelain, had been China's chief trade commodities. During the 1600s and 1700s, however, tea overtook both in importance. The tea trade played a great role in global economics during the 1700s and 1800s. During those centuries, "all the tea in China" became the most popular slang phrase to describe unimaginable wealth. Shown here is the traditional method of harvesting and processing tea in China.

The Qing's refusal to bargain was partly tough business sense. However, it also had to do with feelings of superiority: the Qing believed that the emperor was the Son of Heaven, that China was the **Middle Kingdom** and the center of the universe, and that all outsiders were barbarians. What the Qing failed to realize, however, was that the Western "barbarians" were, by this point, much more scientifically and technologically advanced than the Chinese—and had stronger navies, better weapons, and more effective armies. The days when the Chinese could intimidate foreigners into accepting such an embarrassing and unprofitable imbalance of trade were about to end.

The Opium Wars and Foreign Domination of Qing China

Meanwhile, the British, followed by other Europeans, found a clever, if unethical, way to break into Chinese markets: the **opium trade**. Opium was known in China, but not widely available, in the 1700s. In the early 1800s, the British began flooding China with opium grown in northeastern India. With lightning speed, opium became the drug of choice among Chinese of all classes. The British made fantastic profits, and the balance of trade swung suddenly in their favor. Over time, other countries—including France, Portugal, and the United States—sold opium to China, but Britain controlled 80 percent of the trade.

The Chinese government was outraged. The trade was illegal. It reversed the balance of trade, and silver bullion, instead of flowing into China, flowed out at an alarming rate. Moreover, opium addiction was so widespread that it affected economic productivity: on any given day, millions of farmers and workers were so incapacitated by the drug that they could not work. The Chinese protested to the West. One official lamented, "The foreigners have brought us a disease which will dry up our bones, a worm that gnaws at our hearts, a ruin to our families and persons. It means the destruction of the soul of our nation."

The Qing government tried to strike back by arresting dealers, seizing opium supplies, and intercepting boats carrying the drug. The problem for the Chinese was that

aggressive action risked giving the foreigners an excuse for war. This happened in 1839, when the Chinese navy blockaded Canton, one of the few ports where foreigners were allowed to trade, sparking the first **Opium War** (1839–1842). The British won easily, then forced the humiliating Treaty of Nanking on the Chinese. The Qing government had to open five more ports to foreign trade, lower tariffs on British goods, and grant extraterritorial rights to areas in China where the British lived and worked (British, not Chinese, law prevailed in these areas). In addition, China surrendered **Hong Kong** to Britain.

Further trade conflicts, including a second Opium War (the so-called Arrow War) and a Franco-British expedition to Beijing, took place between 1856 and 1860. New treaties legalized the opium trade, opened more ports to foreign trade, and granted greater powers to the Portuguese, French, British, Americans, and Russians, who set up **economic concessions** on Chinese territory. Later in the 1800s, China grew weaker and had to give more privileges to foreign traders. Japan, Germany, and Italy gained concessions as well. Much territory along the Chinese coast was extraterritorial: legally under foreign, not Chinese, control. By 1898, foreign vessels were allowed unrestricted travel up the rivers of China.

The Taiping Rebellion

Serious internal problems dogged the Qing at the same time. The worst was the **Taiping Rebellion** (1850–1864), the costliest and most devastating civil war in world history. The Taiping Rebellion lasted almost a decade and a half and claimed between 20 to 30 million lives, making it the second deadliest war in history, next to World War II.

MILLENARIAN REBELLIONS

A number of millenarian rebellions during the 1800s were motivated in part by religious and apocalyptic thought. In addition to the Taiping Rebellion discussed in this chapter and the revolt of the Mahdi described in Chapter 24, examples include the Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of the mid-1850s and the Ghost Dance frenzy that led to an 1890 massacre of Sioux. In the former, a female prophet foretold in 1856 that, if the Xhosa of South Africa slaughtered their cattle, spirits would wipe out the British settlers. With many of their animals already dying from a sickness probably brought to Africa by European cattle, the Xhosa began killing their cattle in early 1857, leading to a vast famine. In the case of the Ghost Dance, the Paiute visionary Wovoka—ironically a preacher of peace—popularized the ritual among many western Native Americans. It became a rallying point for the Sioux, many of whom were killed by U.S. forces at Wounded Knee.

The uprising was started by Hong Xiuquan, a Cantonese clerk educated partly by Protestant missionaries. An aspiring government official, Hong failed his civil service examination. The shock caused him to have visions, in which he became convinced that he was Jesus Christ's younger brother, destined to establish a "heavenly kingdom of supreme peace"—the meaning of the word *taiping*—in China.

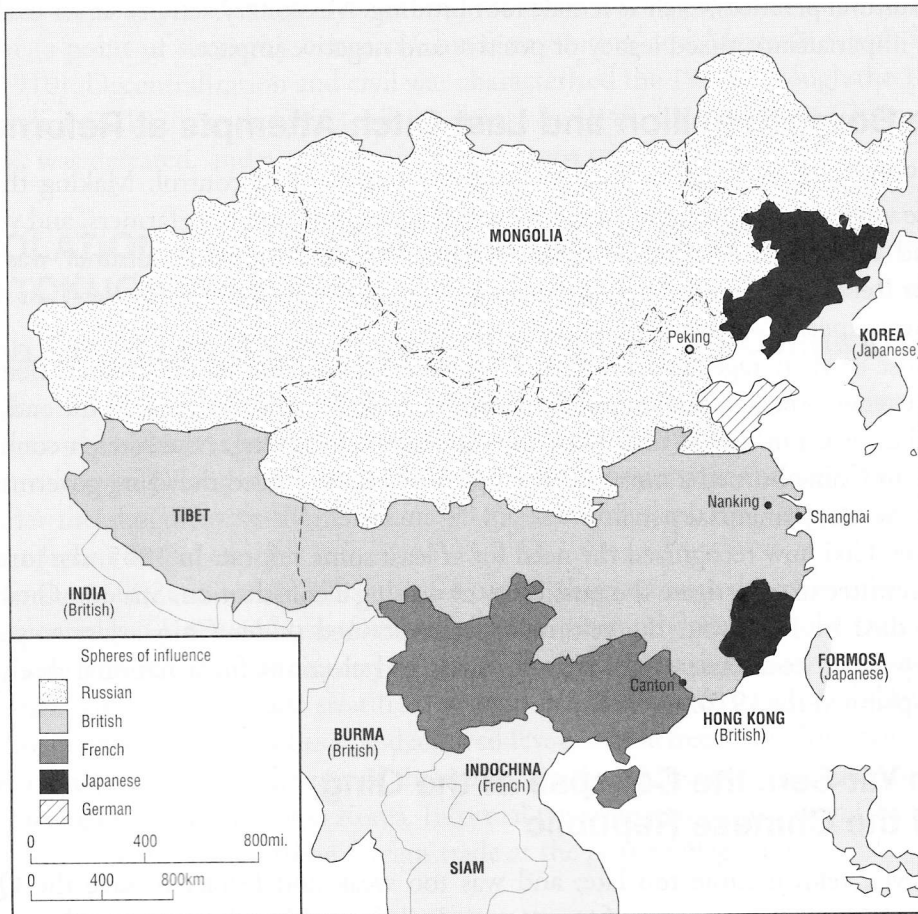
Hong's rebellion began in 1850. An extraordinarily magnetic leader, Hong attracted several followers capable of organizing an effective modern army. His vision of a new China also appealed to millions of ordinary Chinese who resented the Qing's high taxes, its arbitrary and oppressive rule, and the fact that the Manchu emperors were essentially foreign rulers. At their peak, Hong and the Taiping leaders controlled one-third of China.

The Taiping Rebellion waned after 1860. Competent generals took over the Qing war effort, and the government was assisted by a foreign force—the Ever-Victorious Army—commanded by an American soldier of fortune, Frederick Townsend Ward, and then the English general Charles "Chinese" Gordon. Quarrels among the Taiping leadership hurt the movement as well. By the early 1860s, the Taiping forces were in retreat. Hong committed suicide by taking poison in 1864, and the remaining Taiping leaders were captured and executed.

The Leadership of Dowager Empress Cixi

The Taiping Rebellion left China in ruins, and the Qing government was thrown into chaos. A reform campaign—the **self-strengthening movement**—was begun in the 1860s, but was confined to economic and military, not social, modernization. It was also of limited impact, because of opposition from the strongest figure in Chinese politics—the dowager empress Cixi, who “ruled” China from 1878 to her death in 1908. A concubine to the emperor in the 1850s, Cixi became a major figure at the Qing court. In 1878, she placed her nephew Guangxu on the imperial throne and gained the position of regent. She did not rule China in her own right, but controlled her nephew—and the government—long after Guangxu became an adult.

Under Cixi’s highly conservative influence, Qing rule became more oppressive. China’s outlying possessions—Tibet, Mongolia, Chinese Turkestan—began to slip away, gain greater autonomy, or fall into foreign hands. At home, Cixi opposed all reform, which she regarded as pro-Western treason. In 1898, when her nephew, the emperor, began listening seriously to reform-minded advisers, she acted harshly. When Guangxu launched his short-lived Hundred Days’ Reform, Cixi placed him under house arrest and executed the reformers.



Western Spheres of Influence in China, 1910.

Starting in the early-to-mid-1800s, Great Britain, then other Western nations, pressured China into opening its markets and yielding up economic and political control over much of its coast. These concessions grew in size and number during the 1800s and early 1900s, reaching their peak just before the Qing dynasty’s collapse in 1911.

The Sino-Japanese War and the Open Door Policy

All this time, foreign domination of China increased, especially as the new nations of Germany and Italy pushed for a greater share of Chinese trade. Germany took the major port of Tsingtao. Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). In 1898, the United States, with its **Open Door Policy**, arranged for all Western nations to have equal access to Chinese markets. Such a policy reduced much of the pressure that European nations were placing on China to open up further, but it also meant that foreign control continued.

Missionaries in China

Another result of increased foreign influence in China was a rise in the level of missionary activity there. From the late 1800s through the mid-1900s, it became more common for Protestant and Catholic clergy and volunteers to travel from Europe and the United States to China in order to spread Christianity and teach Western languages. In this way, they interfered with and even eroded traditional Chinese culture.

However, missionaries also brought scientific and technological knowledge, treated diseases and ailments with modern medicine, and helped eliminate oppressive cultural practices, such as female **foot binding**. Missionary activity serves to illustrate imperialism's mixed legacy of positive and negative impact.

The Boxer Rebellion and Last-Ditch Attempts at Reform

In 1900, Chinese anger at foreign influence burst out of control. Making things worse were a severe drought, which damaged agriculture and hurt farmers, and widespread unemployment in the cities. What followed during the summer was the **Boxer Rebellion**, so called because many of the rebels were Chinese “boxers,” or martial-arts experts.

Most of their rage was directed at foreigners, especially in the capital, Beijing, where rebels attacked foreign residents and besieged foreign legations. In the end, the rebellion was put down, mainly by foreign troops. In revenge, the foreign communities in China burned a number of temples. They also forced the Qing government to pay a heavy financial penalty.

Even Cixi now recognized the need for at least some reform. In 1905, she formed a committee to investigate the possibility of writing a constitution. She and Guangxi both died in 1908, but the reform effort continued under China's last emperor, Henry Puyi. Local assemblies were formed, and elections for a national assembly were planned for 1910.

Sun Yat-Sen, the Collapse of the Qing, and the Chinese Republic

However, reform came too late, and was too weak and feeble, to save the Qing dynasty. Opposition groups of many types had formed in China, especially among younger Chinese who opposed Manchu domination of their race and favored Western-style modernization. The most important of these revolutionaries was **Sun Yat-sen** (1866–1925), who lived and traveled widely in America and Europe. Sun

united a number of opposition groups into a movement called the Revolutionary Alliance and promoted three “people’s principles”: nationalism (opposition to Manchu rule and Western imperialism), democracy, and livelihood (a semi-socialist, but not Marxist, concern for people’s welfare). Although he supported using force to remove the Qing, Sun hoped to unite all of China’s people in equality under a constitutional democracy. In many respects, his ideals were similar to those of France’s revolutionaries in 1789. Unlike them, however, he supported universal suffrage for women as well as men.

The Qing regime collapsed in the fall of 1911, because of a major uprising in the Chinese region of Wuhan. Although Sun was in the United States at the time, his movement was at the rebellion’s forefront, and as the revolution spread, he returned from America. A Chinese Republic was founded in early 1912, with Sun as its president. His party now called itself the **Nationalist Party (Kuomintang)**. For the first time in recorded history, China was ruled not by an imperial dynasty or foreign conqueror, but a politician brought to office by popular action.

But as in revolutionary France, political idealism was no match for ideological disagreements between left and right (with Sun in the middle), economic crisis, and the breakaway of frontier provinces. Shortly after coming to power, Sun was forced to step aside as president in favor of military officers who governed more from the right (a point of similarity between China’s revolution and Mexico’s, which began in 1910). Decentralization and civil war characterized the 1910s through the 1940s. Sun died in 1925, with China still in chaos. In 1949, his successor, Chiang Kai-shek, was defeated, and a communist government seized power.

ISOLATION AND PARTIAL MODERNIZATION IN TOKUGAWA JAPAN

The Tokugawa Shogunate in the Eighteenth Century

In the 1750s, Japan was ruled by the **Tokugawa Shogunate**, which had taken power in the early 1600s. As before, supreme authority technically rested with the emperor, but real power belonged to the shogun, who ran the country in the emperor’s name. Under the shogun were the remnants of the **samurai** class, the warrior aristocracy from Japan’s feudal era.

In the 1600s and early 1700s, the Tokugawa shoguns were dynamic rulers. They had centralized Japan and transformed it from a constantly warring collection of disunified states into a single country at peace. The Tokugawa shoguns were highly dictatorial, creating a rigidly stratified society that restricted social mobility, kept ordinary citizens out of politics, and allowed few personal freedoms. Tokugawa Japan also isolated itself from the rest of the world. By the 1720s, the only country Japan had formal relations with was Korea. Informal ties were maintained with China, and the government allowed some foreign trade at the port of **Nagasaki**.

Partial Modernization in Tokugawa Japan

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, Tokugawa Japan partially modernized, both economically and socially. Population growth was steady. Japan, already a society of