

THE SEARCH FOR
MODERN
CHINA



CHINA'S CONFUCIAN-TRAINED scholars were aware of the moral and economic pressures on their society in the early nineteenth century. Drawing on the intellectual tradition in which they had been raised, they proposed administrative and educational reforms, warned about the rapidly rising population, and urged greater fairness in the distribution of wealth. Some also pointed to the social inequities separating men and women, and pleaded for greater sensitivity toward the status of women in daily life.

The spread of opium addiction posed a particularly complex social dilemma. Scholars, officials, and the emperor himself were torn over whether to legalize the drug or ban it absolutely. At the same time, massive British investments in the drug's manufacture and distribution, and the critical part that opium revenues played in Britain's international balance-of-payments strategy, made the opium trade a central facet of that nation's foreign policy. The Qing, believing the problem to be a domestic one, decided to ban the drug. The British responded with force of arms. Defeating the Qing, they imposed a treaty in 1842 that fundamentally altered the structure of Qing relations with foreign powers, and ended the long cycle of history in which China's rulers had imposed effective controls over all foreigners resident on their soil.

This new foreign presence in China coincided with—and doubtless contributed to—new waves of domestic turbulence. Uprisings against the Qing had been growing in frequency during the later eighteenth century. The widening social dislocations of the nineteenth century brought even greater unrest, until in mid-century four major rebellions erupted, at least two of which—the Taiping and Nian—had the potential to overthrow the dynasty. The Taiping was based on fundamentalist Christian and egalitarian principles that cut at the heart of Confucian and imperial values; the Nian introduced new patterns of mobile guerrilla warfare that threatened the prestige of the state's basic

military institutions. The other two rebellions, both led by Muslims, broke out in China's far southwest and northwest, and challenged the hold of the Qing over the non-Chinese peoples in its more inaccessible regions. Only an extraordinary series of military campaigns led by Confucian-trained scholars who put their loyalty to traditional Chinese values above all else, and were determined to perpetuate the prevailing social, educational, and family systems, enabled the Qing dynasty to survive.

The irony was that, in winning their great victories, Confucian statesmen were drawn to emulate and adopt certain elements of foreign military technology and international law that were ultimately to undermine the sanctity of the very values they endeavored to preserve. But initially such consequences could not be foreseen, and in the name of self-strengthening the Qing not only established new arsenals for arms manufacture and shipbuilding, they also set up schools to teach foreign languages, hired foreigners to collect customs dues on an equitable basis, tried to hire a small fleet of Western ships and seamen, and established the equivalent of a Foreign Ministry, the first such institution in China.

Relations between Chinese and foreigners remained strained, however. Antimissionary outbreaks in China were matched by anti-Chinese outrages in the United States, and the flow of Chinese immigrants was ultimately slashed back by a series of unilateral American restrictions. In both cases, misunderstandings of the other's culture and goals abounded, even though personal efforts made clear the possibilities for tenderness, compassion, and imaginative adaptation between the races.

By the late nineteenth century, despite the foreign pressures and domestic turbulence, it looked as if the Qing might construct a viable new synthesis. But the many achievements in the application of foreign technology to China's military and industrial needs were shattered by two defeats that the Chinese suffered in brief yet bitter wars—one with the French and one with the Japanese—that left much of China's vaunted "modern" navy at the bottom of the sea. When a burst of reforming zeal in 1898 was stillborn because of conservative opposition, the stage was set for the Boxer Uprising of 1900, in which a profound anti-Westernism led to widespread attacks on foreign missionaries and

their converts. The Boxers were suppressed by foreign force, but in their wake came the first signs of a growing anti-Manchu Chinese nationalism, expressed in newspaper articles and pamphlets, in economic boycotts, and in a flurry of insurrectionary activity aimed at undercutting the power of the Qing state from within.

The final attempt of the Qing to rally their dynastic forces was a potentially effective mix of political, military, and economic reform: there were experiments in constitutional government on Western models, efforts at rearming and reorganizing the army along Western lines, and a move to gain a stronger hold over China's economy by developing a centralized railway network. Yet the combination, instead of bringing stability, brought confrontations and new layers of misunderstanding. The constitutional assemblies established in each province provided a focus for criticisms of the Qing and for the emergence of local interests. The vision of a tough, modernized army under skilled Manchu direction could not but be threatening to Chinese nationalists dreaming of their own future independence from the Qing. And the government's attempts to centralize railways and use foreign loans to do so angered provincial investors and patriots alike. When these flames of dissent were skillfully fanned by radical leaders and their impatient followers, the Qing found its foundations seriously undermined.

Helpless in the face of a military mutiny that erupted in late 1911, the Manchus saw no choice by early 1912 but to abdicate their power and declare the Qing dynasty at an end. There remained a crucial vacuum at the center of the Chinese state and no specially talented leaders able to fill it, only various groupings with rival ideologies and claims. The legacy of dynastic collapse was not a confident new republic, but a period of civil war and intellectual disorder that, tragically for the Chinese people, was even harsher than the period that had followed the fall of the Ming 268 years before. Yet amid the confusion, the dreams for a strong China held out by statecraft thinkers, self-strengtheners, constitutional reformers, and revolutionaries were never wholly eclipsed. The constructive aspect of the last century of Qing rule was that the idea of China's greatness was not allowed to die.