China, imperial: 8. Qing or Manchu dynasty period, 1636–1911
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Historically, the Qing or Manchu dynasty period (1636–1911) was the last empire in Chinese history. On May 15, 1636, Hong Taiji, the second khan of the Later Jin dynasty, changed his dynasty name to Qing. According to the Chinese belief of five elements, “Qing” symbolizes the element of water, which could effectively overthrow the Ming dynasty which represents the element of fire. The Manchus finally occupied Beijing on June 5, 1644, following the defeat of the peasant rebel, Li Zicheng, who had overthrown the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Li had forced the last emperor of the Ming dynasty, Chongzhen, to commit suicide. As a result, from 1644 Qing formally became the last Chinese dynasty. The Ming loyalists continued military resistance against the Qing troops in China proper, which included the eighteen inland provinces within the Great Wall that were considered the boundary of the Han, Tang, and Ming dynasties. Finally in 1661 Qing troops occupied Yunnan province where they hanged Yongli, the last emperor of the Southern Ming dynasty. From 1662, the Qing dynasty officially became the sole ruler in China proper.

There were three ways the Qing dynasty evolved to become the last Chinese empire. First, it performed political and religious rituals to support its legitimacy to succeed the Han-Chinese Ming dynasty. Second, it started military campaigns in the 17th and 18th centuries to occupy the Inner Asian borderland, including Tibet and Xinjiang, which were inhabited by nomadic tribes and were geographically well beyond China proper. Third, it allowed the cultural rituals of the nomadic people in order to claim its legitimacy to rule over non-Han-Chinese people in Inner Asia.

Like other dynasties in Chinese history, Qing rulers emphasized the mandate of Heaven to legitimize their rule in China, especially the Manchus who were the descendants of the Jurchens. The Jurchens founded the Jin dynasty (1115–1234) and conquered the northern part of the Song dynasty regions (960–1279). The Manchu people were regarded as barbarians according to the Chinese dichotomy of Hua-Yi (Chinese-Barbarian) distinction. In 1635, Hong Taiji seized the “Imperial Seal of China” in military campaigns against Chahar Mongolia (today’s Inner Mongolia). This seal, used by emperors of different dynasties since the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE) until the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), symbolized that Hong Taiji received the mandate of Heaven to be the legitimate ruler of China. As a result, on May 9, 1636, Manchu, Mongolian and Han-Chinese royal family members and officials of the later Jin dynasty made a petition to Hong Taiji and persuaded him to take the throne of the Chinese emperor. On the same date, Hong Taiji wrote a letter to the ruler of Korea, which was still a tributary state of the Ming dynasty, to persuade Korea to change its loyalty toward the Manchus. In the letter, Hong Taiji argued that although the rulers of the Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties were barbarians, they were able to conquer China and become “Tianzi” (the Son of Heaven, Chinese name for emperor), proving that the mandate
of Heaven did not favor anyone except those with virtue. In other words, even if the Manchus were barbarians, when they possessed virtue, they could also become Chinese emperors.

When Qing troops occupied Beijing, the Qing court held a royal funeral for Ming Emperor Chongzhen and built a memorial for Ming officials who were killed by the peasant rebels. In addition, it made a proclamation
that the Qing court shared the same hatred as Ming subjects for the rebellion of Li Zicheng, so it conducted military campaigns to expel Li’s forces from Beijing to achieve righteous justice. However, when Qing troops decisively defeated Li’s force in Shaanxi province, the Qing court condemned Ming Prince Fu in the south, who made himself a new emperor without fulfilling his responsibility to take revenge for Emperor Chongzhen by killing Li Zicheng. This justified the Qing court’s action of conquering the Ming loyalists in the south. After the conquest of the Ming loyalists, Emperor Kangxi and Qianlong were eager to recruit Han-Chinese intellectuals to participate in a national-sponsored project of composing and collecting Chinese Confucian canons. The promotion of Confucian learnings ensured the Qing emperor would be the legitimate ruler over all Han-Chinese subjects.

The formulation of the theory supporting the legitimacy of the Manchu rule of China was well illustrated by Emperor Yongzheng’s book, *The Great Doctrine for Enlightening Those who Had Been Misled*, published in 1728. The book collected various arguments written by Yongzheng and the confession of Zeng Jing, an intellectual who used Hua-Yi distinction to challenge the legitimacy of Yongzheng’s throne. Yongzheng argued that the Qing dynasty originated from Manchuria, this was similar to the native places and origin of all other Chinese. Besides, although King Shun and King Wen were barbarians, they were the ideal sage kings according to Confucianism, so even barbarians can have the virtuous legitimacy to be Chinese emperor. Yongzheng further argued that during the golden ages of the Han, Tang, and Song dynasties, China still had invasions from the northern and western nomadic people, who were outside the influence of Chinese civilization and thus became barbarians. However, when the Qing took over China proper, it also annexed the tribal states of Mongolia, so there were no longer any barbarians living outside the “Tianxia” (All-under-the-heaven, the name of the Chinese world order). As a result, Yongzheng emphasized that there should no longer be any distinction between Chinese and barbarians. Therefore, the Manchu military conquest of borderland, which was outside the traditional boundary of the Han-Chinese dynasties, further enhanced the legitimacy of the Manchu rule in China.

Emperor Kangxi suppressed the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories and conquered Zheng’s Taiwan, the last stronghold of Ming loyalists, in 1681 and 1683 respectively. This created the foundation for the Qing court to have military campaigns to expand its boundary beyond China proper. Xinjiang, Tibet, and Qinghai, known as the Xiyu (western regions) in Chinese history, became strategically important in geopolitics because Dzungar Khanate basically unified these regions by 1677. More importantly, the Dzungar Khanate tried to seek military assistance from Russia so it could forcibly annex Khalkha Mongolia (today’s Mongolian People’s Republic) as a tributary state of the Qing Empire. In other words, the Dzungar Khanate would restore the territory of its predecessor, Esen Taish, who captured the Ming Emperor Zhengtong in 1450 and was the most powerful Oirat Khagan. Had the Dzungar Khanate succeeded, it would have become the Russian “collaborator” in invading the Qing Empire.

When the Dzungar Khanate annexed Khalkha Mongolia, some Khalkha escaped to Inner Mongolia and sought help from the Qing court. Emperor Kangxi led armies himself to conduct three military campaigns against the Dzungar Khanate in 1690, 1691, and 1696 and forced the ruler of the Dzungar Khanate, Choros Erdeniin Galda, to commit suicide in 1697. The Qing annexed Qinghai in 1698. Tsewang Rabtan succeeded the
throne of Galda and kept the military spot in Yili. Rabtan was able to restore the military strength of the Dzungar Khanate and conquered Lasha in 1717. Qing forces were able to occupy Tibet and Ürümqi in 1720 and 1722 respectively.

Stationed at eastern Qinghai, the Khoshut Khanate was always appeased by the Qing court, during the Kangxi’s reign, as a strategy for isolating the Dzungar Khanate. Kangxi reneged on his promise of letting the Khoshut Khanate restore its rule in Tibet after the Dzungar Khanate’s conquest in 1717. When Emperor Yongzheng succeeded Kangxi’s throne, Lobdzan Dandzi, the ruler of the Khoshut Khanate, rebelled against the Qing Empire in 1723. Dandzi was suppressed by the Qing armies and fled to join the Dzungar Khanate and the Qing then occupied all of Qinghai. In 1727, Galdantsuren succeeded Rabtan’s throne. He refused Yongzheng’s demand of surrendering Dandzi and again crossed the borderline of the Qing Empire. In 1729, Yongzheng started various military campaigns against the Dzungar Khanate, but Yongzheng followed Kangxi’s thinking that the Qing armies did not pose any threat to Yili due to their logistic problem of a long supply line originating in Gansu province. Instead, the Qing dispatched a large group of garrisons to station at the borders of Qinghai and Khalkha Mongolia. They then waited for the Dzungar Khanate to invade having traveled a long distance. When they were close, Qing troops launched a surprise attack on them and, as a result, the Qing did not have any further decisive battles with the Dzungar Khanate and occupied Yili until Qianlong’s reign.

One of the main legacies of Emperor Yongzheng was the Sinification of the administration of ethnic-minority groups in China proper. To accomplish this, the central government appointed Han-Chinese officials to rule over non-Han-Chinese people in different southwest provinces, which had been the duty of native tribe headmen in the past. This new policy led to the rebellion of the Miao people in China proper, marking the beginning of so-called “Ten Great Campaigns,” which was celebrated in Qing official annals as Qianlong’s most important military achievement. The war scenes of the campaigns were drawn as the result of cooperation between Chinese painters and Jesuit missionaries like Giuseppe Castiglione. The paintings were seen by Qianlong as the best way of celebrating the greatness of the Qing Empire. According to The Record of All Completion written by Qianlong in 1792, the ten campaigns include two wars suppressing the rebellion of the Jinchuan hill peoples in Sichuan (1747–1749, 1771–1776); two wars conquering the Dzungar Khanate (1755–1759), which resulted in the capture of Yili and the establishment of Xinjiang province; one war suppressing Muslim people in southwestern Xinjiang (1757–1759); one invasion of Burma (1767–1769); one war suppressing the rebellion of Lin Shuangwen in Taiwan (1786–1788); one invasion of Vietnam (1788–1789); and two wars defending Tibet against Nepal invasions (1790–1792), which marked the beginning of stationing Chinese troops in Tibet. Qianlong named himself as “Old Man of All Completion” because of the success of these campaigns.

The emphasis on using high-level military force in building the Qing Empire was justified by Qianlong’s quotation of Tang Emperor Taizong’s writings claiming that the peace settlement could only be sustained by demonstrating strong military force. This explained why, of 600 000 Dzungar people, 30 percent of them were massacred by Qing troops, while 50 percent died in a pandemic, and only 20 percent managed to flee to Russia and Kazakhstan.

To secure peace, delegates from Inner Asian states were invited to visit the Qing
court to observe the Qing’s strong military power and witness demonstrations of archery skills by Manchu general Zhaohui. This show of force was very effective, and ensured that Kazakhstan, Kokand (a city in today’s Uzbekistan), and regions as far away as Afghanistan, became tributary states of the Qing Empire in addition to Korea, the Ryukyu Islands, Vietnam, Burma, Siam, and Nepal. The farthest boundary of the Qing Empire in the late Qianlong period reached Sakhalin Island in the northeast; the protectorate Ryukyu Islands in the east; Taiwan in the southeast; the Nepal-Tibet border in the southwest; the Sino-Afghanistan border in the west; the protectorate Kazakhstan in the northwest; along with Uriankhai, Khalkha Mongolia, and the Outer Khingan Mountains in the north. The territory controlled by the Qing Empire was second only to the Mongol Empire during the Yuan dynasty. A massive migration of Han-Chinese people to Manchuria and these newly acquired territories, which were outside China’s jurisdiction before the Qing dynasty, consolidated the standardization of cultures within the empire. This had never been achieved during the Yuan dynasty despite its stronger military strength and larger territory than that of the Manchus.

Traditional Chinese historiography judged that the 130 years’ rule of emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong was the golden age of the Qing Empire, even though the decline of the Qing Empire started in the later part of the Qianlong period. However, if only evaluating the Qing Empire from the perspective of military strength, the seeds of the Qing’s decline had already been sown in 1644. The conquest of the Ming loyalists and the suppression of the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories all relied on the effort of the surrendered Han-Chinese generals of the Ming court and Han-Chinese Green Standard Armies respectively, rather than the Manchu Eight-Banner Armies. The Manchus were incompetent in actual combat and only took on the role of supervising Han-Chinese troops during battles. However, the Green Standard Armies soon also lost their strength and morale despite numerical superiority over the rebels, as in the case against the rebellion of the Jinchuan hill people.

During the reign of Jiaqing (1796–1820), the successor to Qianlong, a continuous outbreak of river flooding, the White Lotus Rebellion (1796–1804), various Miao rebellions (1796–1806), and the Eight Trigrams Uprising (1813) exhausted the Qing’s national financial reserves within a few years. The Qing court could no longer rely on the corrupted Eight-Banner Armies and Greed Standard Armies to suppress rebellion, so it became necessary to recruit local troops raised by village gentries. Besides, despite Yongzheng and Qianlong’s efforts to persuade the bannermen to use the Manchu language, most of the bannermen lost their ability to speak Manchu. But the memorials were still written in Manchu until the end of the Qing dynasty as the last stronghold preserving the Manchu identity of the Qing Empire. These events signified the decline of the Qing Empire financially, militarily, and culturally.

The Qing Empire was at the peak of Sino-centrism in Chinese history in handling foreign relationships within its own world order. The Chinese world order could be divided into three categories: Inner Asian zone, Sinic zone, and an outer zone. The Inner Asian zone included Mongolia, Tibet, and Central Asia; the Sinic zone included Korea, Japan, Ryukyu Islands, and Vietnam which were culturally influenced by China; the outer zone included European countries like Russia, Britain, and others which were outside the influence of Chinese culture. The Inner Asian zone belonged to the
dynasty’s internal affairs administration, while the other two zones were controlled by the external affairs administration of the Qing Empire.

Since the establishment of the Qin dynasty, the wealthy agricultural Chinese dynasties faced military invasion from the poorer nomadic Inner Asian peoples because of their different economic structures. Empires prior to the Qing dynasty used a tributary system and frontier trade as the ways of maintaining a peaceful relationship between China and Inner Asian peoples, but such peace was only sustainable when the military power of China was strong. In other words, these Inner Asian states were still independent and outside of Chinese jurisdiction.

From the establishment of the Qing Dynasty, the Qing rulers recognized the need for direct control of these nomadic people in order to ensure the long-term stability of the dynasty. To accomplish this Hong Taiji established a Mongolian Office (Monggo jurgan) in Manchu in 1636 and then renamed it as the Lifanyuan (Barbarian Control Office) in 1638 to handle the affairs related to Mongols and, later, Tibetans, Uyghurs, Miao people, and even Russians. The Manchu name of Lifanyuan is tulergi golo be dasara jurgan, literally meaning the Ministry Ruling the Outer Provinces. This reflected a brand new mindset from previous dynasties, in that Inner Asian people were to become direct imperial subjects of the Qing Empire. At designated intervals, Inner Asian nobles were required to travel and make pilgrimage to the Qing emperor in Beijing and participate in the imperial hunt held by the Qing emperor in Mulan Weichang, north of Chengde. The procedures for these two rituals were handled by the Lifanyuan and were unique in the Qing Empire. The rituals put more emphasis on the building of personal relationships between the emperor and the nobles than on the subordination of the nobles to the emperor.

Marriage between the Qing royal family and the Mongolian nobles was encouraged. In addition, in the case of the Sino-Tibet relationship, since Hong Taiji the Qing emperors were given entitlement by the Tibetan lamas as Manjusri (Mañjuśrī) bodhisattva. Emperor Kangxi started the conferment of the Penchen Lama, and Emperor Qianlong even used paintings to depict himself as the reincarnation of Manjusri. Because of this, the Qing emperors obtained a more superior political and religious status than the four Tulkus in Tibet. Through all of these political and cultural mechanisms, Inner Asian peoples were changed from outer barbarians into inner barbarians. In other words, the Qing Empire internalized its Sino-Inner Asian relationship. The Qing emperors transcended Han-Chinese identity to support their legitimate rule in the Inner Asian regions.

In handling foreign relations the Qing Empire inherited the Ming’s tributary system. The tributary system of the Qing Empire before the 19th century, both in theory and in real practice, was that the various countries in the Sinic zone as well as the Inner Asian zone sent envoys to pay tribute, using their local products, and to perform kotow to the Qing emperor at designated intervals. In return, the Qing emperor recognized the kings in their respective countries and offered them quantities of silk or other quality Chinese products. In doing this, the Qing Empire had suzerainty over these tributary states without colonizing them. However, these states did not enjoy equal status with China, because, according to the Sino-centric worldview, all foreigners who came to China should be submissive and transformed by the supremacy of Chinese culture. This Sino-centric mindset came into conflict with the modern European idea that all nations and sovereigns are equal and that they should build their diplomatic relations through the signing of treaties based on equal footing in
acCORDING TO INTERNATIONAL LAW. THIS LED TO THE DIPLOMATIC DISPUTES BETWEEN CHINA AND RUSSIA IN THE 17TH CENTURY, AND WITH BRITAIN IN LATE 18TH AND EARLY 19TH CENTURIES.

In the mid-17th century, Russia built military fortresses at Nercinsk and Albazin, and tried to invade and loot the Amur River region of Manchuria. At the two battles of Albazin from 1685 to 1688, Russian troops were besieged in Albazin and Russia realized the great military strength of the Qing Empire. At that time, Russia was preoccupied with war against Poland as well as an internal power struggle, so it was unable to dispatch extra forces to fight the Qing troops. At the same time, the Qing Empire was recovering after eight years of bloody war to suppress the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories, so the two countries finally signed the Treaty of Nercinsk on October 2, 1688 to decide the Sino-Russian borderline in the northeast. Since the Qing Empire controlled Khalkha Mongolia, Russia also wanted to determine the Sino-Russian borderline between Siberia and Khalkha Mongolia, resulting in the two countries signing the Treaty of Kyakhta on August 23, 1727. Through these two treaties the Qing Empire effectively held back Russian expansion in Asia for almost one and a half centuries. This ended when Russia made use of an opportunity during the Anglo-French expedition to China from 1858 to 1860 to seize the whole Amur region after they had established Vladivostok as the only ice-free sea port on the Pacific Ocean in Asia.

The terms of the above treaties were based on equal footing, but the mechanisms working behind the treaties were still the tributary system based on the Sino-centric mindset. After the signing of the Treaty of Nercinsk, Russia sent an envoy to Beijing and requested free trade with China. Emperor Kangxi believed this request did not adhere to the status of a tributary state, so he decided that the Chinese general stationed at Amur River had the authority to reject any Russian petition if it violated the suitable manner of a tributary state. As the Russians came from a distant place, Kangxi felt that a Chinese emperor should show benevolence toward such distant people, so he allowed Russian merchants of not more than 200 people to travel to Beijing for a tribute trade every three years. They lived in Russian quarters managed by the Lifanyuan and could stay for no more than 80 days. In the negotiation of the Treaty of Kyakhta, the Russian envoy requested to negotiate it at Beijing, but Emperor Yongzheng refused on the grounds that there was no precedent for negotiating a treaty with foreign envoys in Beijing, so the Qing officials and Russian envoy negotiated the treaty at Kyakhta instead. Therefore, before the mid-19th century, the Sino-Russian relationship was handled by the Lifanyuan within the framework of the tributary system rather than a modern treaty system. This was the strategy used by the Qing emperors to show the strength of the empire to their imperial subjects, in that even European countries could become tributary states of China. The diplomatic gesture of ignoring the equality of nations, as mentioned in international law, made China become a semi-civilized country, as its Asian counterparts also did according to Scottish legal philosopher James Lorimer’s theory in the 19th century.

There might have been direct military confrontation between the Qing Empire and Britain well before the Opium War (1839–1842) when Nepal requested Britain, which already occupied over half of Indian territories, to dispatch troops to defend Kathmandu, Nepal’s capital, against the Qing’s attack. But Qing and Nepal soon reached a peace agreement in September 1792 and confrontation was avoided. A Sino-British commercial conflict was started in 1757 when the Qing court tried to limit foreign trade to Canton. James Flint
of the British East India Company went to Tianjin to complain about unfair treatment faced by British merchants in Canton trade and requested the Qing court to reopen trade in Ningpo. This move violated Qing’s tributary system because no foreigner could come to the north without the Chinese royal approval, so Flint was detained in Macau for three years before he could return to India. As a result, Qianlong formulated the Cohong system in Canton whereby foreign merchants could only arrange trade with Cohong merchants in Canton appointed by the Qing court. In addition, various limitations were placed on foreign merchants in Canton such as a ban on bringing wives to Canton and a rule that all foreign merchants needed to leave Canton for Macau in winter. All such limitations soon led to commercial and cultural disputes between British merchants and Chinese officials in Canton and, finally, to the Opium War.

King George III of Britain tried to resolve the Sino-British commercial conflict by dispatching the Earl of Macartney and Lord Amherst as envoys to China in 1793 and 1816 respectively. Macartney was able to meet Qianlong at Chengde during the celebrating of Qianlong’s birthday. However, Qianlong refused Macartney’s request for the stationing of a British envoy and the establishment of a British merchant house in Beijing. This was because Britain was still regarded as a tributary state of China and such requests violated the tributary system. Jiaqing even refused to meet Amherst on the ground that Amherst landed in Tianjin without royal approval and refused to perform kotow to Jiaqing. Such diplomatic conflict was due to China’s self-depiction as the “Celestial Empire,” and the center of the world. Therefore, no other nation or sovereignty should have a status equal to China or the Chinese emperor. However, neither Qianlong nor Jiaqing realized that Britain, especially after the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), was the strongest nation in Europe and had the largest colonial empire in the world including India, Australia, and Canada as its main components. The normalization of foreign relationship between the Qing Empire and British Empire became impossible.

In the remaining period of the Qing dynasty the Opium War started the painful struggle for China of transformation from an empire into a nation and the change of the Chinese people’s identity from imperial subjects into citizens. Britain defeated the Qing Empire in the Opium War and the Treaty of Nanking was signed on 29 August 1842. The treaty stipulated that China needed to open Canton, Fuzhou, Amoy, Ningpo, and Shanghai as treaty ports to the British merchants without any limitations such as those stipulated in the Canton-based Cohong system in the past. America and France followed the British example by adding most-favored-nation clauses in commercial treaties signed with China in 1844. China no longer used the term “barbarians” in these treaties to make reference to the nationals of these Western nations.

The opening of the treaty ports started the process of China’s transformation from tributary system to treaty-port system. The treaty-port system was further formulated and enhanced by the signing of the Treaty of Tianjin (1858) and Treaty of Beijing (1860). These treaties were regarded as unequal treaties which infringed on China’s sovereign rights because they granted extraterritorial rights to the Western consuls to have legal jurisdiction over their subjects in China. Additionally, the stationing of foreign consuls in Beijing and treaty ports further dissolved the tributary system because the consuls represented the sovereigns of their respective nations and they no longer needed to perform the kotow ritual for the Chinese emperor. This practice was not only followed by Western nations but
even Japan, China’s tributary state in the past. In 1873, the Japanese envoy, Soejima Taneomi, refused to perform kotow and, with hands at his front, only bowed toward Emperor Tongzhi.

In 1861 the Tsung-li Yamen (which literally means the Office in Charge of Affairs of All Nations) was established to handle foreign affairs replacing the Lifanyuan. The establishment of the Tsung-li Yamen was an important turning point that diplomatically transformed the Qing from a Sino-centric empire into a nation in the world. The Tsung-li Yamen regarded Western nations to have equal status with China as a nation, rather than as barbarians or “fan” as the Chinese name of the Lifanyuan suggested. But, the Tsung-li Yamen also was handling the most important issues in the empire because it was created as an administrative department and enjoyed higher status than the Six Boards, which in the past supervised the Lifanyuan. The Tsung-li Yamen was more than a pure foreign office handling diplomatic affairs with foreign nations; it also initiated and supervised the establishment of numerous modern enterprises relating to commerce, transport, military, and education in the late 19th century.

The most important organization under the Tsung-li Yamen was the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs (CIMC). The CIMC was first established by Britain in Shanghai in 1853 to collect customs duties from foreign merchant ships on behalf of Chinese authorities when the original Shanghai customs house was destroyed by Taiping-related rebels. Soon the CIMC established offices in treaty ports with Robert Hart as the inspector general, who was answerable to the Tsung-li Yamen. The foreign-staffed CIMC plus foreign settlements in treaty ports, namely Shanghai, Canton, and Tianjin, became more or less independent kingdoms outside Chinese jurisdiction but they also co-existed with their Chinese counterparts. Hart was always referred to as “our Hart” by Chinese officials in the Tsung-li Yamen because of his contribution in settling the Sino-British and Sino-French diplomatic disputes in 1876 and 1884 respectively, and his facilitating the increase in the customs duties rate after the Boxer Protocol in 1901. The Qing court offered Hart the honorary title of “Junior Guardian of the Heir Apparent,” which was the highest honor any foreign official in the Chinese government had ever received before. Hart simultaneously showed loyalty to China and Britain, his home country. Many foreign maritime customs staff were famous sinologists who admired Chinese culture. The appointment of foreigners to administrative positions was not new as the Qing Empire had appointed Manchu and Han-Chinese people for the same government posts before, but the maritime customs organization and treaty-port system changed the old Manchu-Han distinction into a new Chinese-foreign distinction.

Apart from Hart, Anson Burlingame, an American diplomat, was also a key person in transforming the Qing Empire into a diplomatic nation. Burlingame was appointed by the Qing court in 1867 to lead the first Chinese diplomatic mission to visit Western nations. After the Opium War, Burlingame helped China sign the first equal treaty with America, which allowed Chinese people to become citizens in America. Burlingame also led a mission to visit various European nations. This paved the way for China to establish its embassies abroad, which had been ignored by Qianlong when Macartney made such a suggestion in 1793.

The tributary system was not immediately replaced by the treaty-port system after the defeat of the Qing Empire in the Opium War. It was still in force even after the occupation of Beijing by Anglo-French forces in 1860, as it was well into the 1880s, with the last tributary mission to China made by Nepal
in 1908. In the eyes of the Qing court, the treaty-port system was only a supplement of the tributary system that acted as a policy of control-by-a-light-rein (chi-mi) of foreign barbarians. This was accomplished without alternating the power hierarchy of China with the Chinese emperor at the center of the Chinese world order. The employment of Robert Hart to supervise the CIMC and Charles George Gordon’s leadership of the Sino-foreign-composed Ever Victorious Army to suppress the Taiping rebels were examples of China allowing various “foreign barbarians” to be ruled by the Qing Empire and to be cultivated to Chinese culture according to the Sino-centric ideology. Despite the adoption of the Christian doctrine, Taiping rebels, who occupied the southern part of the Yangtze River region from 1853 to 1864, also shared the same type of Sino-centric ideology when they proclaimed John Bonham, the Hong Kong governor, as “English Chief” while Bonham was visiting Nanking, the rebel’s capital in 1853. In their view he came from thousands of miles away to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Taiping Kingdom, so in return the “Celestial dynasty” permitted the British to do trade in China and assist the rebels to exterminate the Manchus.

After all the eagerness of Han-Chinese Confucian gentries to help the Manchu-Qing court suppress Han-Chinese, Taiping rebels demonstrated the success of the Qing Empire in establishing its legitimate rule of Han-Chinese people since the 17th century. Therefore, the Qing court successfully suppressed the Taiping and Nien rebels in the 1860s, recaptured Xinjiang from Muslim rebels in 1877 and forced Russia to return Yili. The loyalty of the Han-Chinese gentries and the support of foreign advisors further enhanced the confidence of the Qing court to keep the tributary system and Sino-centric mindset, leading them to hope that a revival of the Qing Empire was still possible.

However, the Japanese invasion and the partition of China by the various powers in the late 1890s forced the Qing Empire to end its Sino-centric mindset. In 1876, Japan forced Korea to sign a treaty stipulating that Korea was an independent nation, which implied Korea was formally no longer the tributary state of China. The Tianjin Convention in 1885 further affected China’s suzerainty over Korea in that China could not dispatch troops to Korea without prior notification to Japan. The complete defeat of China in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) gave the final blow to the Chinese world order. This was the first time in Chinese history that China was defeated by one of its tributary states and was required to cede territory to Japan. This proved the failure of the Self-Strengthen Movement (1861–1894), which tried to modernize the Qing Empire militarily and economically without altering its political system.

The outbreak of the xenophobic Boxer Rebellion, which aimed to kill Western missionaries and foreign envoys with support from radical Chinese officials, led to the occupation of Beijing by the Eight Power Expedition in 1900. The indifferent attitude of Chinese commoners who witnessed the beheading of their compatriots after the Boxer Rebellion was a typical scene in the early 20th-century China. The irrationality and indifference of the Chinese commoners toward Chinese national affairs were criticized by Chinese intellectuals as an example that Chinese people lacked modern national citizen qualities and Chinese nationalism. Liang Qichao, one of the most influential intellectuals in the late Qing period, published a series of articles called “The New Citizen” to discuss the ways of improving the qualities of Chinese nationals. Bushido, the national spirit of Japan, became one of the important reference points of Liang’s articles and he believed that China should revive its spirit of martial arts in order to save the country.
from the foreign invasion. To rescue China from the crisis of national survival Liang suggested it was necessary to use the concept “nation” to replace the idea of depicting Chinese empire as “all-under-the-heaven” and cultivate the Chinese people with the idea of a national consciousness to replace the emphasis on self-interests. Another intellectual, Zhang Binglin, even argued that China (Zhongguo) should be understood as a nation culturally adhered to the Han-Chinese culture. In fact, over two and a half centuries of Sinicization of the Qing Empire already conformed the Qing dynasty to fit the China of Zhang’s definition.

Japan’s defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 further convinced the Qing court of the need for political reform because many Chinese intellectuals at that time believed that the political system of a constitutional monarchy accounted for Japan’s victory over the absolute monarchy of Russia. Despite the Qing court’s announcement of practicing constitutional monarchy in the near future, the revolutionaries, led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, believed that what the Qing court tried to implement was a fake constitutional system, which just aimed to prolong the rule of the Qing court over Han-Chinese people who would remain loyal imperial subjects and submissive to the Manchu officials. Therefore, Sun proposed the Three People’s Principles and one of the principles was nationalism.

Sun’s version of nationalism was different to Liang’s version as Sun suggested Han-Chinese nationalism as an ethnic idea rather than the establishment of a nation-state in the modern sense as suggested by Liang. Sun used the slogan “Expel Dalu, revive China” to attract support from fellow Chinese nationals for the revolutionary cause. “Dalu” was a derogatory term for nomadic people including the Manchus. The 1911 Revolution finally overthrew the Qing dynasty and forced the last Qing emperor Puyi to abdicate from his throne. The last chief Han-Chinese official in the Qing court, Yuan Shikai, was formally inaugurated as the first president of the Republic of China in Beijing in 1912 after the surrender of the post of temporary president of the republic by Sun in Nanjing.

The Qing dynasty had been the third longest dynasty after the Tang and Ming dynasties and it left a political legacy that was unsurpassable by other Chinese dynasties. The Qing was a truly cosmopolitan empire that in its 249 years’ rule over China proper, including the Inner Asian borderland, brought long-term stability and harmony between the Han-Chinese and the ethnic-minority people in the Chinese Empire, which was rare in Chinese history. As a result, even Sun Yat-sen and his revolutionary followers, who upheld anti-Manchu nationalism during the late Qing period, needed to uphold the slogan “Five Races under One Union” as the main national principle when the Republic of China was established, so the new republic had a new five-color national flag. The flag composed of red, yellow, blue, white, and black colors, representing the Hans, Manchus, Mongols, Muslims, and Tibetans respectively. Anti-Chinese sentiment in some Inner Asian borderlands, because of Sinicization, made Xinjiang and Tibet proclaim de facto independence from China in 1912. This lasted until 1949 when the People’s Republic of China was established. Nevertheless, the effective military expansion of Chinese borders and the Sinicization of the Manchus, as well as the administration of ethnic-minority groups in the Qing dynasty, all added to the foundation of China to become the enormous geographical entity that is China today.

SEE ALSO: British Empire: 1. 1707–1914; China and treaty-port imperialism; China, imperial: 7. Ming dynasty period, 1368–1644; Christianity and empire; Confucianism; French
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