

1

Imperial China and the Chinese Revolution

POINTS TO CONSIDER

In 1900, China was a politically backward empire, militarily inferior to its neighbour, Japan, and economically exploited by the Western colonial powers. Within the next 50 turbulent years, it had rejected its imperial past, embraced republicanism, survived Japanese occupation, undergone civil war and embraced Communism. In order to understand Chinese history in the first half of the twentieth century, it is necessary to have an appreciation of the character of China as a nation as it had developed by the end of the nineteenth century. This chapter provides an outline of the main features of China as it stood in 1900 and then examines the challenges to the imperial system that led to the fall of the Qing in the Chinese Revolution of 1911–12. It looks at:

- The character of imperial China
- China's relations with the outside world
- The last years of imperial China 1900–11
- The Chinese Revolution 1911

Key dates

1644–1911	Rule of the Qing dynasty
1794	McCartney mission to China
1839–60	Period of the opium wars
1895	China defeated in war with Japan
1895–1911	Railway boom in China
1898	Formation of Hong Kong as British colony
1899	Adoption of open door policy by USA
1900–1	Boxer Rising
1904	Tibet granted independence from China
1904–5	Russo-Japanese war
1905	Workers' protest against US anti-Chinese immigration laws
1908	November
	Death of Emperor Guangxu and Dowager Empress Cixi

2 | China: From Empire to People's Republic 1900-49

1911	October 10	'Double Tenth' rising at Wuhan (Wuchang)
1912	February 12	Formal abdication of Qing dynasty. Chinese Republic established

1 | Imperial China

Recorded history in China dates from around 2200 BC and is customarily measured by reference to the 15 **imperial** dynasties which ruled from that time until the early twentieth century. The last of these was the **Manchu** dynasty, which ruled China from the mid-seventeenth century until the overthrow of the imperial system in the revolution of 1911. The Manchu emperors, as their name suggests, came from Manchuria, a large north-eastern state that originally lay outside China. Strictly speaking, therefore, the rule of the Manchu was the imposition of foreign authority over China. It is true that the Manchu came to absorb so many aspects of Chinese culture that to the outside observer it seemed that the two peoples were indistinguishable. Nevertheless, the Chinese never lost their sense of being subject to alien rulers, which explains why, when **Chinese nationalism** began to develop in the nineteenth century, it often expressed itself in the form of anti-Manchu agitation. An interesting example of this was the symbolic cutting off by the Chinese of their pigtails, the traditional Manchu hairstyle which had been imposed on them.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Chinese population was composed of four main ethnic peoples:

- Han
- Manchu
- Mongol
- Tibetan.

Of these four groups the Han were by far the most numerous, forming 90 per cent of the population. It was this Han predominance that had given China its sense of being one nation, this despite its great size (as large in area as the USA) and its many linguistic, regional and climatic variations.

Confucianism

A striking aspect of old China was its resistance to change. Arguably, a visitor transported from China in 100 BC to China in AD 1800 would have found a society little different from the world he had left. Absence of change lay at the heart of Chinese culture. This was a matter of deliberate choice. Central to the antique Chinese view was the concept of harmony as developed by the sage and teacher **Confucius** (551-479 BC). Confucius was not a religious thinker; he thought that gods probably did not exist, and that, even if they did, they were too remote and unknowable to worry about. It was this world and the people within it that

Key question

What were the distinctive characteristics of imperial China?

Rule of the Qing dynasty: 1644-1911

Key date

Imperial

The rule of the various dynasties and emperors over China.

Manchu

Also known as the Qing, the last imperial dynasty (1644-1911).

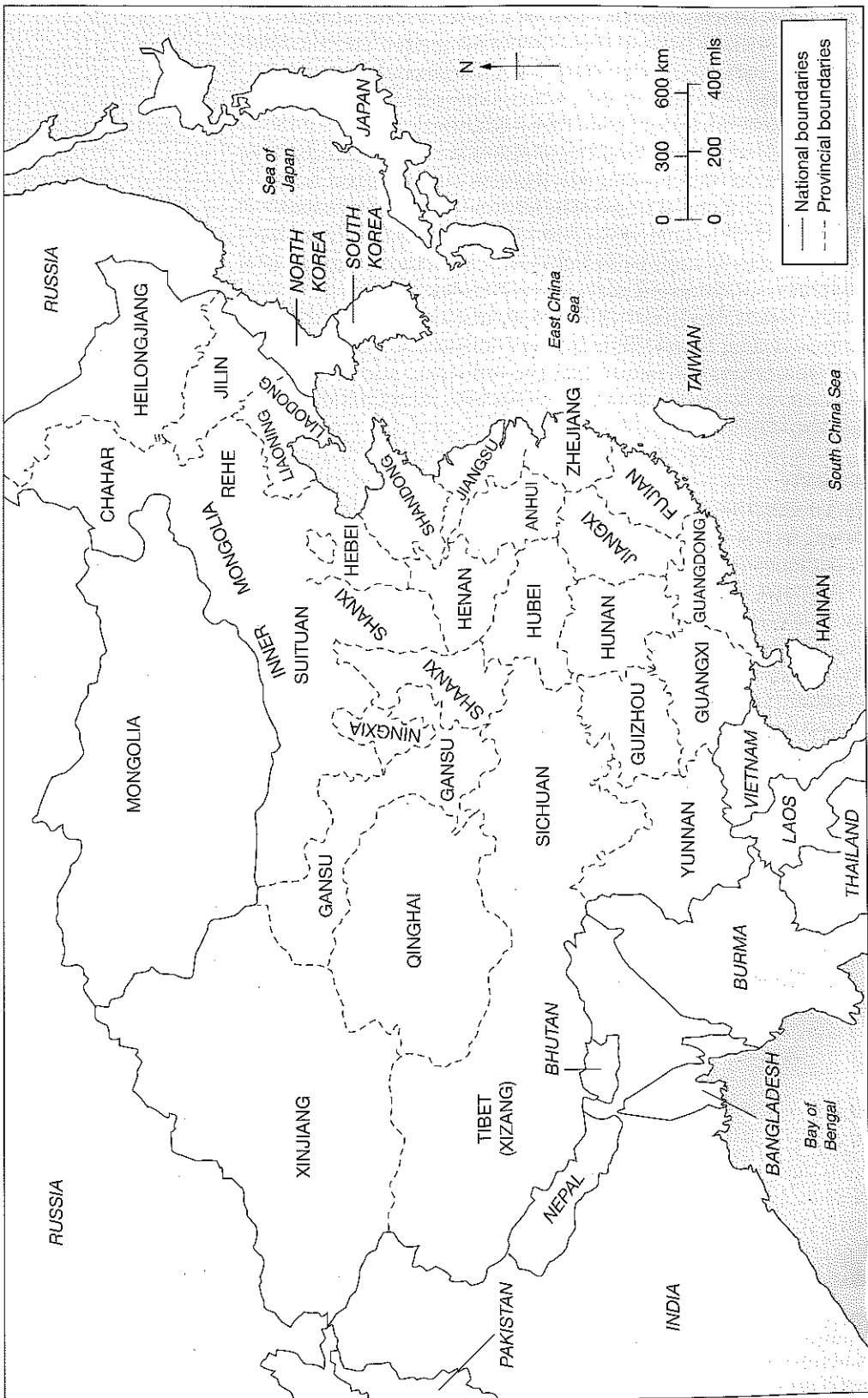
Chinese nationalism

Strongly committed belief in the need for China to re-establish its independence and sovereignty.

Confucius

The Latin name of the Chinese scholar (551-479 BC), whose philosophy of acceptance influenced China for thousands of years and continues to shape Chinese thinking today.

Key terms



Imperial China.

4 | China: From Empire to People's Republic 1900–49

mattered. His concern was to advance a code of conduct that would prove socially harmonious. Confucius graded and classified behaviour in such a way that every human relationship was covered by laws of etiquette that, when followed, would allow people to live at ease and peace with each other.

The essence of his teaching was that human happiness could be found only in the harmonious life. Man, as a species, was born into an ordered, natural world that already existed. Therefore, the task facing all people in life was to relate as smoothly as they could to the laws of nature. To fight these laws was to engage in a hopeless activity. Disasters, such as earthquakes and floods, obviously caused death and destruction, but it was a misunderstanding to see them as tragic intrusions. They were part of the workings of nature that the individual and society had to embrace; to complain about them was as pointless as shouting against the wind.

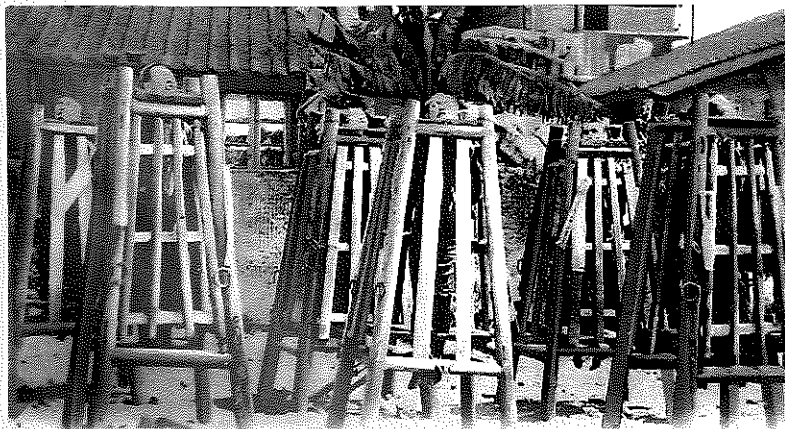
Quietism

Confucianism, therefore, may best be described as a form of **quietism**. As a set of guides and principles, it became identified with obedience to authority and the maintenance of the *status quo*. This had particular relevance to the political situation. Since the maintenance of harmony was society's chief purpose, it was the duty of all citizens to accept the political situation as it stood. To challenge it would be an affront to the natural order of things. This notion had an obvious attraction for those in authority. Should anyone protest against the prevailing system, it was easy for the holders of power to denounce such opposition as disruptive and, therefore, improper. It is notable that in Chinese history the severest punishments were imposed on rebels against the existing order. The savage penalties that were inflicted were

Quietism

The acceptance of fate.

Key term



Rebels being publicly executed. Pinioned in wooden cages, the condemned men, with a bar under their chin, stood on a set of planks or bricks which were withdrawn at intervals over a period of three days. The result was slow strangulation. What do such executions reveal about the Chinese attitude to crime and punishment?

intended to express the horror that Chinese society felt towards those who transgressed its basic rules.

The mandarins

It was the predominance of Confucianism in Chinese life that secured the position of the **mandarins** as a dominant class in China. The mandarins were scholars trained in the subtleties of Confucian learning. They went through a series of rigid examinations, which, once passed, gave them an exclusive right to positions in the government and civil service. The mandarins became a social and political élite, which zealously guarded its privileges. It was no accident that the concept of an unchanging society became integral to Chinese culture.

The mandate of heaven

Change, nonetheless, did occur naturally. After all, people die – even emperors. How, then, in Confucian thought were such changes to be explained? The answer lay in the principle known as the **mandate of heaven**. This concept is best understood as the sanctioning of change after it has occurred. Care has to be taken in interpreting the term ‘heaven’: the word does not correspond with the Christian concept of a place of eternal joy reserved for those who live a godly life on earth. ‘Heaven’ in its Chinese sense is best defined as a dynamic or force that both causes and justifies change. The word ‘fate’ is perhaps a more appropriate translation. What this amounted to in practice was that emperors or dynasties who replaced others based their right to do so on the notion that they were acting entirely in keeping with the natural laws of harmony. A rebel, therefore, who challenged the existing system and was defeated remained a rebel, deserving of condign punishment. However, a rebel who challenged the existing system and was victorious ceased to be a rebel. His success proved that he was the legitimate inheritor of the mandate of heaven.

Mention of the emperors in the previous paragraph introduces a key feature of government as it had evolved in ancient China. The emperor had become the principal ruler and magistrate, entitled to complete obedience from his subjects and government officials. The position, which was hereditary, gave the holder an absolute authority that can best be compared with the Western notion of the **divine right of kings**. Obedience to proper authority, both familial and social, was a fundamental duty for Chinese citizens. They could fulfil the requirements of the Confucian code no better than by totally accepting the orders and instructions they were given and by honouring without question the place in society in which they found themselves.

This **hierarchical** sense of deference and loyalty to proper authority was a marked characteristic of Chinese society: subjects obeyed emperors, wives obeyed husbands, children obeyed parents. In Chinese tradition, an undutiful child was regarded with particular distaste. There are many recorded instances of adult sons and daughters who had brought discredit on their

Key terms

Mandarins

An élite class of scholars.

Mandate of heaven

The force of history that justifies the holding of power by those in authority.

Divine right of kings

The notion that a monarch has a god-given and, therefore, unchallengeable authority to govern.

Hierarchical

Describes the system in which people are ranked in value according to the authority they hold.

6 | China: From Empire to People's Republic 1900–49

family being thrown to their death down wells by outraged relatives. Such behaviour illustrates the demanding Chinese concept of family and social discipline. It helps to explain the lack of **individualism** and the veneration of conformity that has been such a constant feature of Chinese culture. The **totalitarianism** associated with twentieth-century Chinese politics was not a novel imposition. It was the continuation of an ancient tradition.

Individualism

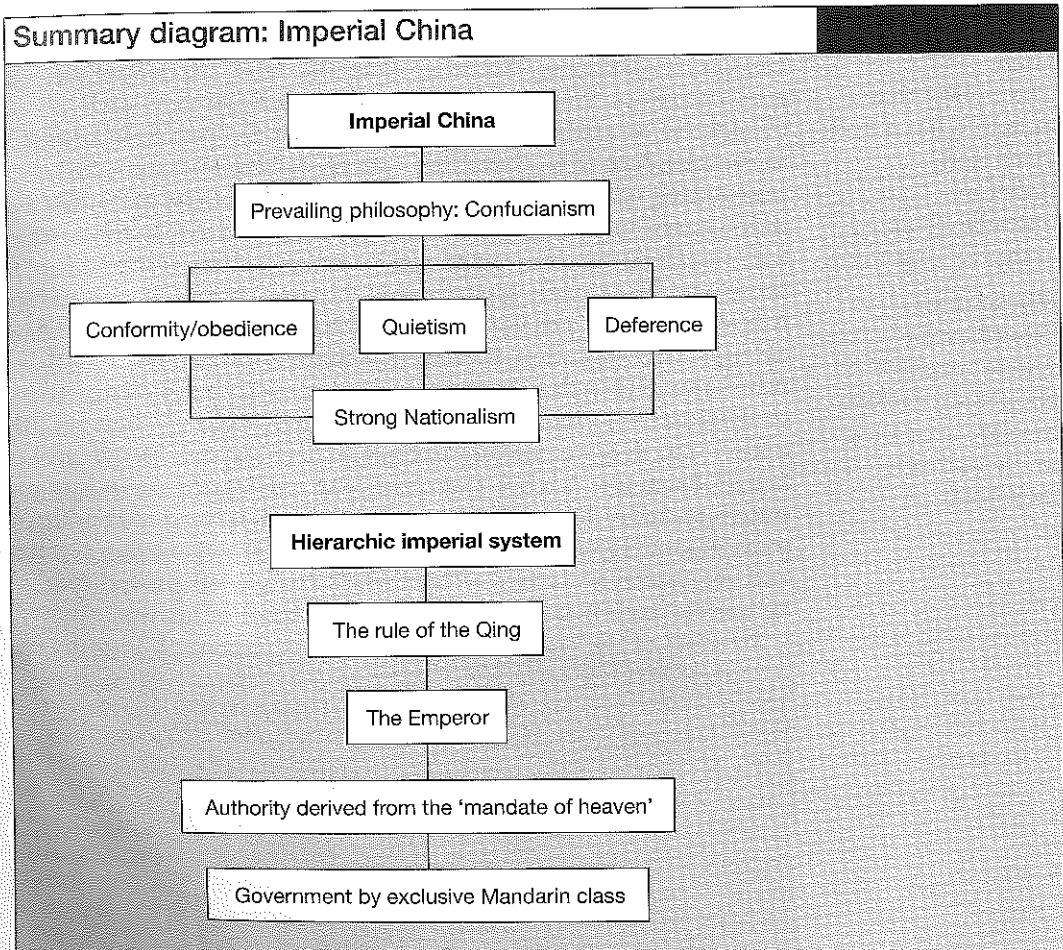
Emphasis on people as individuals rather than as members of society.

Totalitarianism

A system in which the state has complete power over the people.

Key terms

Summary diagram: Imperial China



Key question

How did China see its place in the world in 1900?

Key dates

McCartney mission to China: 1794

Opium wars: 1839–42 and 1856–60

Key terms**Sino-centric**

Inward looking, preoccupied with China. The prefix 'Sino' means Chinese.

Forbidden City

The extensive but exclusive area in Beijing where the emperor lived and ruled and to which access was denied to all but selected guests.

Kowtow

The requirement that, when first entering the emperor's presence, the visitor showed respect by prostrating himself face down and tapping his head nine times on the floor.

Western imperialism

The spread in the nineteenth century of economic and political control by European powers over parts of Asia and Africa.

2 | Imperial China and the Outside World

The Chinese word for China is *zhongguo*, meaning 'the middle kingdom' or 'the centre of the world'. This is a clear example of the essentially **Sino-centric** nature of Chinese thinking, which resulted from its centuries of detachment from outside influences. To the Chinese, anything alien was by definition inferior, and this perception obviously determined China's dealings with foreign nations. The notion that China was wholly self-sufficient, both culturally and materially, meant there was no value in maintaining contact with foreigners. Yet, on occasion, China did need goods and materials from outside. What developed, therefore, was an elaborate tribute system. China would enter into commerce with other nations, but any trade in which it engaged was regarded as being made up of gifts received from inferiors.

Ironically, what China gave in return was often greater in amount and worth than what it received. But this strange pattern of commerce preserved the notion that China was self-sufficient. Striking examples of this notion in operation are to be found in Sino-British relations. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a number of British delegations approached the Chinese emperor with proposals for closer trading links. The Chinese answer on every occasion was to thank the British for their courtesy but to point out that, since Britain had nothing of real value to offer China, there was no point in establishing such relations. When, in 1794, King George III's representative, Lord McCartney, was eventually allowed to enter the **Forbidden City** in Beijing (Peking) to be received by the emperor, he caused acute diplomatic embarrassment by refusing to **kowtow** in the traditional way. Such disregard of Chinese sensibilities may now be looked back on as anticipating the trauma that China was to experience when **Western imperialism** began to impose itself a few decades later.

European domination of China

China's concept of its own unique greatness was severely shaken by its enforced contact with the West, beginning with the opium wars in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The first open conflict broke out in 1839 when Britain demanded that China increase its purchases of opium from British India and Burma. The drug had become widely used in China and was a major source of income to the British. When the Chinese authorities ordered the ports to be closed, Britain dispatched gunboats to impose its will. The inability of the Chinese to match this European firepower came as a shatteringly disruptive revelation. It brought into question the hitherto unchallenged notion of Chinese supremacy.

Britain's superiority in military affairs led directly to economic dominance. China was forced, in a series of one-sided agreements, known as 'the unequal treaties', to subordinate its interests to those of Britain and other Western powers including France, Germany and the USA. The enforced agreements created

8 | China: From Empire to People's Republic 1900-49

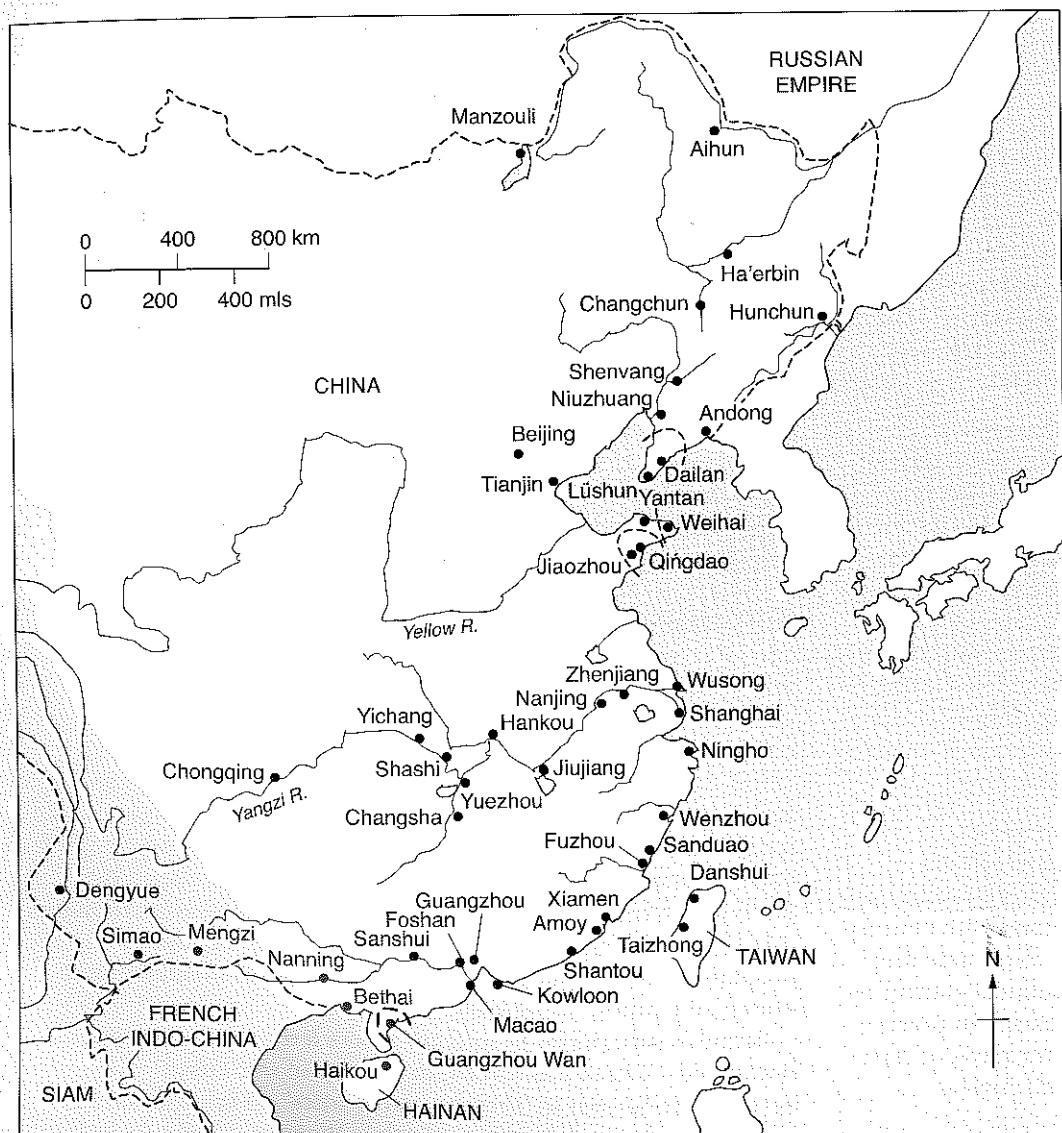
over 50 'treaty ports', which were subject to Western control, and established a series of **concessions**. These were areas within the major cities controlled by individual European powers whose laws were enforced on any Chinese living there.

The sense of humiliation that the Chinese felt over these developments stimulated the revolutionary movements that developed later in China. The Chinese were bitterly resentful but were incapable of mounting effective resistance. The autocratic but ineffectual imperial government with its centre in Beijing proved powerless to stop Western encroachments. Indeed, successive Qing emperors and governments compromised with the occupying powers in order to maintain imperial authority within China. No longer could the Chinese delude themselves

Concessions

International settlements which were, in effect, European mini-states in China.

Key term



The foreign 'treaty ports' established in China by 1900.

Key dates

China defeated in war with Japan: 1895
Formation of Hong Kong as a British colony: 1898

that they were culturally, politically or scientifically self-sufficient. Such beliefs were undermined by the reality of China's subjection to the West and also by its heavy defeat at the hands of the Japanese in a war over territory in 1895.

The 'scramble for concessions'

The defeat of China in the Sino-Japanese war prompted a number of Western powers to tighten their hold on China. In the 1890s, in the 'scramble for concessions', France, Britain, Russia and Germany forced the Chinese to enter into a further series of 'unequal treaties', in which the European nations extended their territorial and commercial interests in China. One especially notable example occurred in 1898 when Britain consolidated its hold over Hong Kong, a region that consisted of three distinct areas: Hong Kong island, Kowloon and the New Territories. In 1842, in the Treaty of Nanjing, China had been forced to cede the island of Hong Kong to Britain in perpetuity. In the Beijing Convention of 1860, the Qing government had granted Britain, again in perpetuity, possession of Kowloon harbour directly facing Hong Kong. In 1898 Britain took over the rest of Kowloon peninsula. This fresh acquisition, known as the New Territories, was ceded not in perpetuity but on a 99-year lease. This completed the creation of Hong Kong as a British **Crown colony**.

There seemed to be a real possibility that China might suffer the same fate as Africa, which was currently being divided between the European imperial powers in the '**scramble for Africa**' (1870–1914). In 1904, a British force, having marched into the far-western border province of Tibet, obliged the Manchu

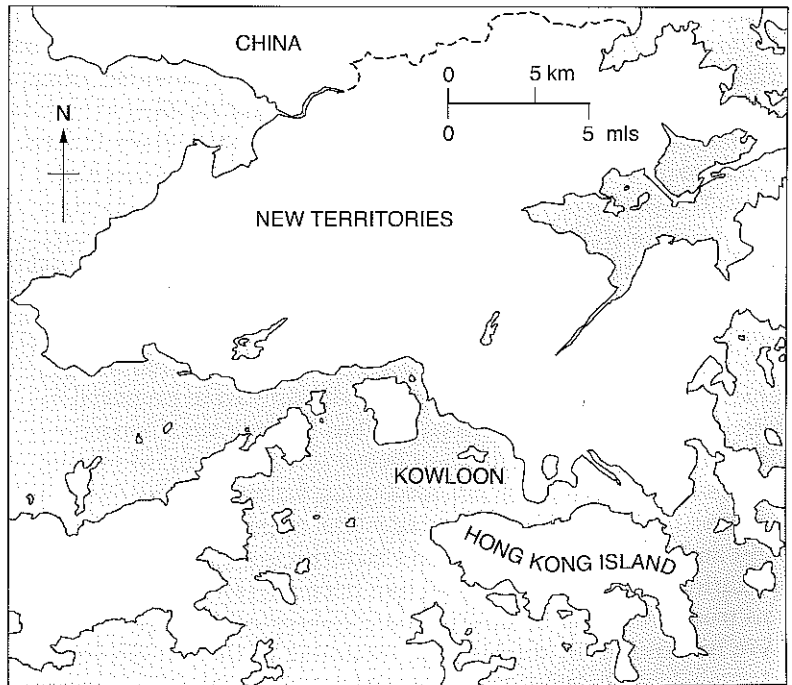
Key terms

Crown colony

An overseas territory directly governed by Britain.

'Scramble for Africa'

Between 1870 and 1914 there was fierce competition among the European imperialist powers to establish colonies in Africa.



Hong Kong colony.

government to recognise Tibetan independence. This, in effect, was an acknowledgement of Britain's control of the region, which, in an earlier century, the Qing dynasty had taken great pride in incorporating into China. The Russians in a similar move at this time demanded that China recognise their influence in Outer Mongolia.

As the Manchu power weakened in the first decade of the century the ability of the West to direct Chinese affairs increased.

China and the USA

What saved China from further fragmentation was the attitude of the USA, which had recently entered the world stage. Despite its anti-colonial tradition, America had begun to develop its own brand of imperialism. The USA had played no part in the scramble for Africa, but it was determined to assert itself in the Pacific region. It adopted a policy for preventing the same subdivision of China as had occurred in Africa. Through its Secretary of State, John Hay, the USA in 1899 warned off the other imperial powers. In diplomatic but unambiguous terms, Hay informed them that America was not prepared to see China's economy fall under their control. No country was entitled to force the Chinese to grant it preferential tariffs; China must be left free to develop its trade and commerce with whom it chose. Although few of the powers were happy with this **open door** doctrine, none was prepared at this stage to challenge the USA directly over it.

China's ambivalent attitude towards the West

Chinese protests against Western domination were frequent but largely ineffectual since they lacked leadership and co-ordination. Frequent strikes and the damaging of industrial machinery clearly expressed the Chinese workers' objection to foreign control but did little to threaten it. What undermined attempts to develop an effective anti-foreigner movement was the inescapable fact that large numbers of Chinese had come to depend for their livelihood on the Western presence. This was particularly evident in the major cities such as Beijing, Guangzhou and Shanghai, where thousands of Chinese workers were employed by foreign companies or in the international concessions. Western favours could not be rejected out of hand. Foreign capital was necessary for China's survival and foreign companies provided jobs for the Chinese.

It has to be said that while the West exploited China, not all Chinese were reluctant to be exploited. Many were prepared to tolerate the poor wages and conditions because the Chinese domestic economy had nothing better to offer them. Moreover, the abuse of workers was not something brought by the West. It was traditional in China. The eagerness of peasants to leave the land and work in Western-owned factories indicated how precarious and grim their lives had been previously. The same was true of workers in locally owned industries. Chinese bosses were not known for the humane treatment of their employees.

Tibet granted independence from China: 1904

Adoption of open door policy by USA: 1899

Key dates

Key question

What was the American attitude towards China?

Open door

The US policy aimed at preventing European powers imposing unfair commercial agreements on China.

Key term

Key question

Why had China's relations with the West become a mixture of detestation and admiration?

Key terms

Sweatshops

Crowded, unhealthy premises, at high risk of fire, where unscrupulous bosses exploited cheap labour.

Indigenous

Home-grown, locally developed.

Foreign devils

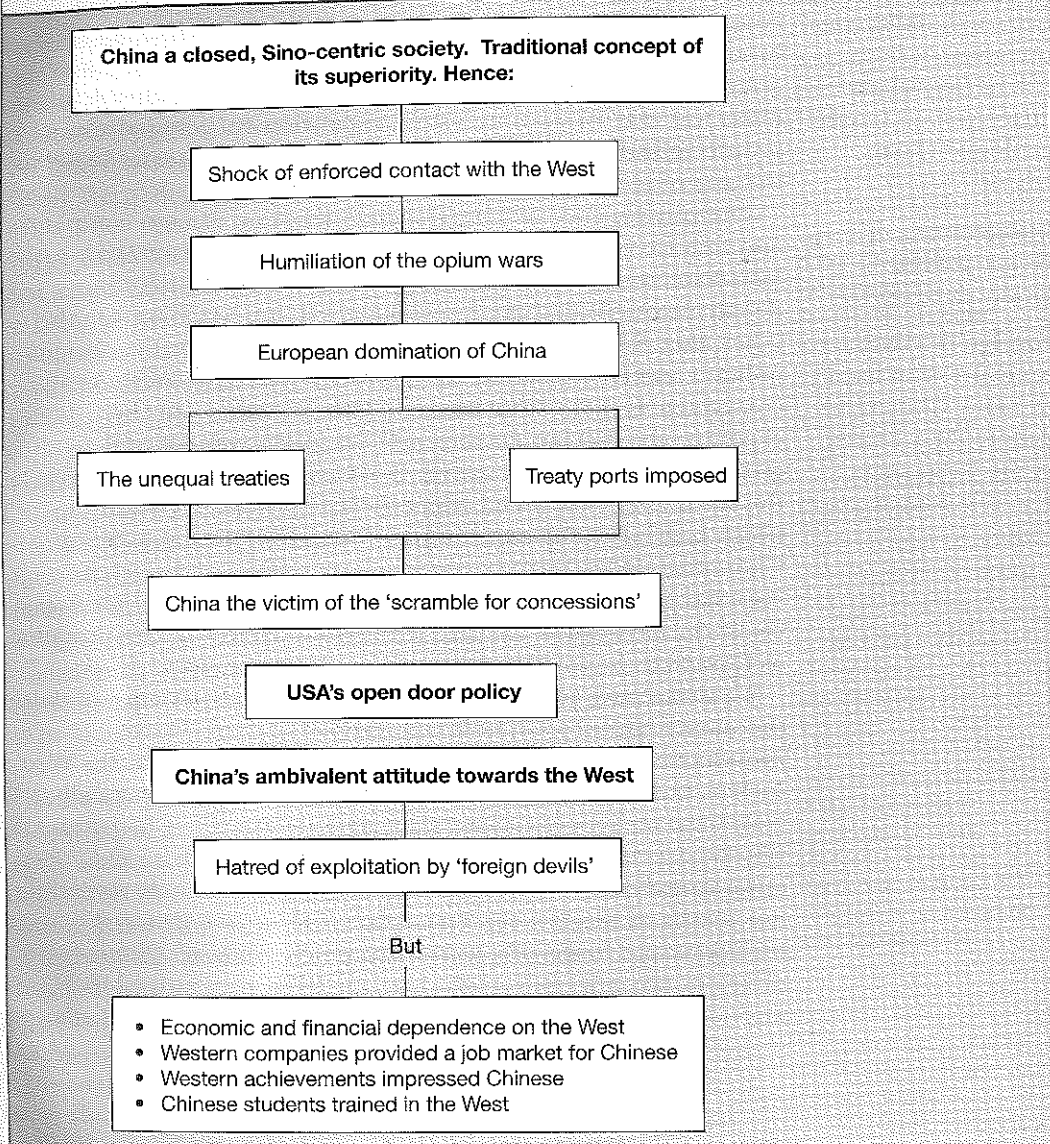
An expression used by many Chinese to denote their hatred of the Westerners who dominated China.

China's small-scale domestic industries had been run as **sweatshops** of the most oppressive kind. Another important consideration was that the presence of Western companies brought work opportunities to Chinese women, who were now able to supplement the meagre family income. A further positive effect was that Western industrial expansion encouraged the growth of **indigenous** Chinese business. China was introduced to the arts of industrial management and training.

The consequence of China's dependence on foreign companies and finance was the development among the Chinese of a love-hate attitude towards the West. On the one hand, they deeply detested what the foreigner was doing to China. On the other, they found it hard to suppress admiration for the obvious military and technological accomplishments of the West. As a consequence, many Chinese came to believe that only by expelling the **foreign devils** could the independence and greatness of China be restored. However, the means of achieving this would be to copy and adapt those very Western qualities which had led to the current subjection of the Chinese. Since China had no tradition of participatory politics and since its imperial governments were unable or unwilling to lead resistance, the frustration of the Chinese led them to conclude that progress in China was impossible except through revolution.

This educative process was increased by the experience of those thousands of young Chinese who studied abroad. Their introduction to practices which had become standard in the West, such as training in applied technology and management skills, both fired and compromised their nationalism. They began to ask why Western advances had not been achieved in China. In answering their own question they became increasingly resentful, not simply of Western supremacy but of their own national traditions and forms of government which inhibited Chinese progress. Much as they might hate the West, they judged that it was only by a Western path that they could achieve their goals.

Summary diagram: Imperial China and the outside world



3 | The Last Years of Imperial China 1900-11

The '100 Days'

The beginning of the end of imperial China may be dated from 1898. In that year the Manchu government introduced a series of reforms that became known as the '**100 Days**'. The measures, which were all based on Western models, included:

- major modifications of the civil service
- innovations in education
- extensive industrial reorganisation.

Key question

What problems beset the Qing dynasty between 1900 and 1911?

'100 Days'

The period of reform, starting in 1898, intended by the Manchu to divert opposition and dispel criticism.

Key term

Key terms

Progressive elements

Those members of the court who wanted China to modernise.

Reactionaries

Those members of the court who opposed the modernisation of China.

Boxers

Anti-Western secret societies, whose name derived from the martial arts they practised.

Key question

Why did the Boxer Rising fail?

Key date

Boxer Rising: 1900–1

The aim behind the reforms was to buy off the government's Chinese critics who had been angered by the Manchu failure to prevent the spread of foreign concessions in China in the 1890s and by the pitiful performance of the imperial armies in the Sino-Japanese war in 1895. The **progressive elements** around Emperor Guangxu (Kuang Hsu) had persuaded him that reform would convince the Chinese people that the imperial government was still in control. Unfortunately for him, the progressives were outweighed by the **reactionaries** at court. The Empress Cixi (Tzu-hsi) and her ultra-conservative faction overawed the emperor and outmanoeuvred his supporters. Appalled by the speed and range of the attempted reforms, Cixi took over the government. Guangxu was obliged to retract his former support of the reformers, all of whom were dismissed, many of them being executed or imprisoned. What the failure of the '100 Days' had revealed was both the crippling lack of cohesion among the advocates of reform in China and the strength of conservatism in Chinese politics. These divisions were to persist as a constant feature of China's history in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Boxer Rising 1900–1

Cixi, whose hatred of reform was matched by her detestation of foreigners, now attempted to use the national feelings that the '100 Days' had generated to launch a nationwide campaign against the 'foreign devils' in China. She gave her backing to the **Boxers**, a collective term for an assortment of anti-Western secret societies, which viewed the Christian Church as their chief enemy. By 1900, the Boxers had begun to perpetrate violent attacks on Chinese Christians and foreign missionaries. With Cixi's approval, this extended into a series of indiscriminate massacres of Westerners. Cixi now judged it opportune to order the international settlements in Beijing to be besieged.

A Japanese officer wipes his sword after beheading a number of defeated Boxer prisoners in 1901. Why are there both Japanese and Chinese troops among the watching soldiers?



What followed showed that she had badly misjudged the situation. Cixi's appeals to the regional governors to send troops to Beijing to form a Chinese army were largely ignored. The reality was that the government in Beijing had neither the strength to enforce compliance from the provinces nor the prestige to attract their help. Without provincial support, Cixi's war on the foreign powers had no chance of succeeding. Indeed, rather than assist the Manchu government, a number of provincial leaders made common cause with the foreigners by promising to protect Western nationals. Within a short time, the Western powers had raised an army to which nine nations contributed, although the majority of the troops were provided by Japan. Once this international force had reached Beijing, it had little difficulty in breaking the siege of the legations and crushing the Boxers. Cixi and the emperor fled south to Xian (Sian) in Shaanxi province.

Having crushed the rising, the Western occupiers imposed severe penalties:

- China had to pay \$450 million in reparation.
- Arsenals and fortifications were destroyed.
- Foreign troops were stationed permanently in and around Beijing.

The Manchu dynasty was allowed to continue, but events had destroyed what little power it had held. Cixi's support of the Boxers had proved as unwise as it had been ineffectual. The failure of the Boxer Rising was a profound humiliation for the imperial court. When the Emperor and Cixi returned to Beijing in 1902 it was an inglorious affair. There was now little popular sympathy for the Manchu dynasty. Those Chinese who were prepared to fight for their nation's freedom from foreign control regarded recent events as proof that the royal government was incapable of leading the people to liberation.

Further Manchu attempts at reform

In a desperate attempt to sustain the dynasty's flagging fortunes, Cixi was prepared to countenance the reintroduction of the reforms which she had previously so vehemently opposed. Constitutional and administrative changes were introduced; among the most striking were the creation of provincial assemblies and the ending of the traditional Confucian examination for civil-service entrants. The intention behind the reforms was clear – to rally support for the imperial government – but the results were not always as intended. The belated attempt of the Qing to present themselves as reformers was unconvincing. Chinese progressives saw the reforms as concessions grudgingly granted by a reactionary government. For them, the idea of the Qing dynasty turning itself into a modern **constitutional monarchy** was too great a stretch of the imagination. Moreover, the far from negligible cost of the reforms had to be met by increases in taxation, which further alienated the commercial and financial interests on whom they were imposed.

Key question

What measures did Cixi introduce in her attempt to save the Qing dynasty?

Constitutional monarchy

A form of government in which the ruler does not have absolute authority and is required to act in co-operation with elected representatives.

Key dates

Workers' protest against US anti-Chinese immigration laws: 1905

Death of Emperor Guangxu and Empress Cixi: November 1908

The dissatisfaction of ordinary Chinese in the face of Qing impotence expressed itself in 1905 when workers engaged in a widespread boycott of American goods. The protest was directed primarily against the adoption of immigration laws in the USA which specifically discriminated against the Chinese, but it was also intended to embarrass the Qing government over its failure to take the lead in condemning American policy. Although interesting as an example of Chinese resentment, the incident remained merely one of a rash of uncoordinated anti-foreigner reactions.

Key term

Regent

An individual who rules until the monarch is old enough or sufficiently capable of taking power himself.

Yuan Shikai and the Regency

In November 1908, the plight of the Manchu dynasty suddenly and dramatically deepened with the death within 24 hours of both Emperor Guangxu and Empress Cixi. This left the dynasty in the hands of a two-year-old boy, Pu Yi, with the deceased emperor's brother, Prince Chun, acting as **regent**. The moment appeared to have arrived for all those who for personal or political motives wished to see the imperial system enfeebled, if not destroyed. Nevertheless, the new regent endeavoured to preserve the royal house by continuing with the reforms that Cixi had sanctioned. In an attempted show of strength, Prince Chun dismissed from office General Yuan Shikai (Yuan Shih-k'ai), the commander of the Beijing army. Yuan might best be described as an over-mighty subject. He had used his military position to become a political threat to the Manchu government. On the pretext that Yuan's war wounds, which had left him with a pronounced limp, made him an undignified presence at court, the regent instructed him to take early retirement. The order, which was deliberately worded so as to make Yuan appear ridiculous, was meant to pay him back for an earlier act of disloyalty to the previous emperor. Yuan hobbled off, vowing retribution.

Prince Chun had intended his actions as a sign of authority, but to opponents of the imperial system the absurd episode was simply added proof of how much of an anachronism the royal court had become. It was one thing for the government to dismiss a difficult individual; it was another for it to deal effectively with the growing opposition of whole groups of disaffected Chinese. Reforms which did not go far enough politically or economically, but which, nevertheless, increased the burden of taxation, frustrated the entrepreneurial business classes. The large number of tax revolts in China during the first decade of the century was an indicator of the widespread resentment felt towards government policies.

Key question

What problems did China's railway boom create for the Manchu rulers?

The railway question

A particular issue that aroused anti-Manchu feelings was that of the railways. Between 1895 and 1911 there was a boom in railway construction in China, which attracted considerable international investment. The expansion of railways and the increase in rolling stock was a nationwide development that promised to bring

prosperity to most regions of China. This raised a political problem for the Manchus. Most of the railways were owned and run by provincial companies. If significant amounts of capital were to go to the companies, the result would be an increase in local financial and political independence, a prospect that was viewed by Beijing as a dangerous challenge to its central authority.

In order to wrest control of China's communication system from the provincial companies, the imperial government undertook what amounted to a railway **nationalisation** programme; owners would be compensated but not to the full value of their holdings. To raise the necessary capital to pay the compensation, the Qing government opted to increase taxes at home and negotiate loans from the West. It was, in effect, seeking to keep central control at the expense of increased international indebtedness. Thus to the scandal of displaced owners and cheated shareholders was now added the humiliation of further dependency on Western bankers. The disaffected commercial lobby now played their part in organising open opposition to a government that appeared to be willing to sacrifice China's economic interests. Revolution was in the air.

Sun Yatsen and the Nationalists

It is significant that revolutionary ideas had made their greatest initial headway among the 10,000 Chinese emigrants living in Japan. The Tongmenghui (Alliance League), the forerunner of the **Guomindang** (Kuomintang), was formed in Tokyo in 1905. Its inspiration and leader was Sun Yatsen. Since the early 1890s, Sun had been a fierce campaigner against China's imperial system of government. His basic political belief was that China could not modernise unless it became a **republic**; he regarded the rule of the Manchu Chinese as moribund. His anti-government views made him *persona non grata* with the result that he was in exile for the greater part of the time between 1895, when he had led an abortive rising in Guangzhou (Canton), and 1911. Whenever possible during this period he returned to Japan because he considered that 'there, nearer to China, we could more successfully carry out our revolutionary plans'. Sun recorded the upsurge in revolutionary activity that followed the Boxer Rising and the humiliating involvement of the Manchu in its failure:

At this time nearly all the provinces began to send students to Japan to receive their education there. Amongst the students who came to Tokyo there turned out to be many people with young and clear heads. They seized on revolutionary ideas at once, and soon entered the revolutionary movement. All the arguments of the students of that day, and all their thoughts, turned around revolutionary questions ... This revolutionary movement amongst the Chinese students found its way into China ... During this period the popular movement grew stronger and stronger ... This period I consider to be the beginning of the epoch of the wide development of the Chinese revolutionary movement.

Railway boom:
1895–1911

Key date

Nationalisation

The takeover by the state of companies and enterprises that had previously been privately owned.

Key term

Key question

What were the main revolutionary notions that inspired Sun Yatsen and the Nationalists?

Guomindang

The Chinese Nationalist Party (shortened to GMD or Nationalists), formed in 1912.

Key terms

Republic

A form of government in which there is no monarch and power is exercised by elected representatives.

Persona non grata

An officially unacceptable person, an outlaw.

Profile: Sun Yatsen 1866–1925

- 1866 – Born in Guandong province
- 1879 – Moved to Honolulu
- 1879–82 – Educated at Iolani School, Honolulu, where he learned fluent English
- 1887–92 – Studied Western medicine in British Hong Kong
- 1892 – Qualified as a doctor
- 1895 – As head of the Tongmenghui led an unsuccessful coup against the Qing
- 1895–1911 – In exile in Europe, Japan, Canada and the USA
- 1896 – Seized in London by Chinese government agents but released after intervention by the British government
- 1912 – Returned to China to become president of new republic
 - Handed presidency to Yuan Shikai
 - Formed the Guomindang (GMD or Chinese Nationalist Party)
- 1913 – Led failed attempt to remove Yuan
 - Fled to Japan
- 1915 – Married Soong Qingling
- 1917 – Returned to China
- 1919 – Reformed GMD
- 1920 – Established Guanzhou (Canton) as GMD's southern base
- 1921 – Became president of breakaway military government in Guangzhou
 - Supported the formation of the Chinese Communist Party
- 1923 – Formally enunciated his 'Three Principles of the People'
- 1924 – Founded Whampoa Military Academy
 - Organised United Front
- 1925 – Died in Beijing from liver cancer

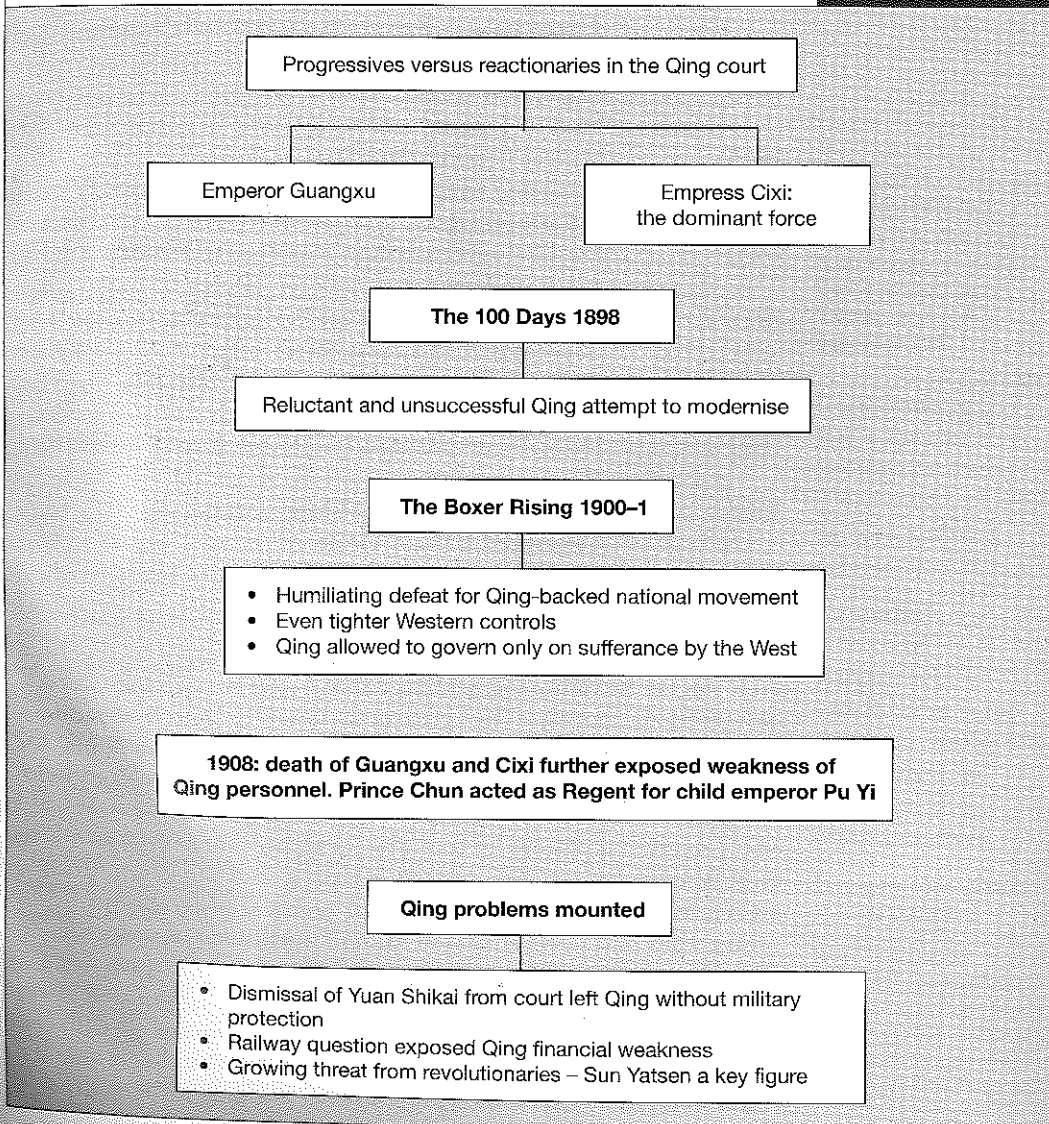
Known as 'the father of the nation', Sun Yatsen was the most influential of the Chinese revolutionaries who sought to regenerate their nation by removing foreign control and reasserting China's independent character and greatness. It was he who first pushed China towards modernity. Although president of the Republic for a brief period in 1912, and leader of the GMD, Sun seldom held real power. His great contribution lay in the field of ideas; it was he who provided a pattern of thought on which other revolutionaries, most notably his protégé, Chiang Kaishek, and the Communist leader, Mao Zedong, developed their political programmes.

Sun, who had been educated abroad, qualifying as a doctor, wished to see China adopt progressive Western principles, such as democracy, nationalism and socialism. His party formalised these aims as the 'Three Principles of the People'. However, so different had the Chinese political tradition been that it is unlikely the Chinese understood or interpreted concepts such as democracy

and representative government in a Western sense. But, for Sun and those he led, this did not matter; the appeal of Western ideas lay in their potency as slogans with which China could begin to reclaim its former dignity. As Sun put it: 'The merit of an ideology does not lie in its logic; whether it is good or bad depends upon its suitability to a certain circumstance. It is good if it is beneficial to both China and the world; otherwise it is bad.'

The revolutionary plans of which Sun spoke were drawn from his foreign experience and education, which had convinced him that modernisation was possible for China only if it adopted progressive Western political and economic concepts.

Summary diagram: The last years of Imperial China 1900–11



Key question

Why did the Qing dynasty collapse in 1911?

Key date

'Double Tenth' rising at Wuhan (Wuchang): 10 October 1911

Key term**'Double Tenth'**

The mutiny at Wuhan on 10 October 1911 which began the revolution.

4 | The 1911 Revolution

Such was the decline in support for the Manchu government that the last years of its life between 1908 and 1911 may be fairly described as a revolution waiting to happen. All that was needed was a spark. This was provided on 10 October 1911, known in China as the **'Double Tenth'**. On that date at Wuhan, a city on the River Yangzi (Yangtze) in Hubei (Hupei) province, troops refused to obey an order to suppress a group of dissidents. The incident was of no great moment in itself; local difficulties of this kind had been frequent in recent Chinese history. However, in the charged circumstances of the time, military insubordination took on an added significance. A rash of similar mutinies occurred in neighbouring provinces. Seizing the moment, local political revolutionaries joined with the military in defiance of Beijing. By late November, all but three of China's provinces south of Beijing had declared themselves independent of central government control.

The role of Yuan Shikai

The Manchu dynasty was in crisis. Its survival depended on its mounting a swift and resolute response. But to achieve this Beijing would have to call on loyal commanders in the provinces, and these were hard to find. The Manchu government had lost military control of the localities. This left only one recourse: to dispatch the Beijing army southwards to reimpose the regime's authority. The government appealed to Yuan Shikai, who had earlier been dismissed from court (see page 15), to return and lead the Beijing army against the rebels. Yuan expressed a willingness to do so, but only on his terms. He marched south, easily retaking a number of rebellious regions, but when his army reached Wuhan, the site of the 'Double Tenth', he deliberately held back from seizing it. His aim was to come to terms with the revolutionaries. The truth was that Yuan had no love for the court which had formerly humiliated him. While pretending to organise resistance to the growing opposition, he used his new authority to betray his masters by plotting their overthrow.

Yuan was in no sense a revolutionary; he was motivated as much by a dislike of republicanism as by his vendetta against the Manchus who had humiliated him. He would allow the Manchu dynasty to fall but he had no intention of replacing it with a permanent republic. His ultimate objective was to resurrect the empire with himself as emperor. It was a matter of personal ambition. He saw in the situation an opportunity to use his military strength to lever himself into power.

Events worked to Yuan's advantage. In November, delegates from the rebellious provinces gathered in Nanjing (Nanking) to declare the establishment of a Chinese Republic. Sun Yatsen, who was in the USA and had therefore played no direct part in the events surrounding the 'Double Tenth', was invited to be the Republic's first president. He returned to China and was installed as president on 1 January 1912. It was at this point that Yuan

made a decisive move. Calculating that, without military backing, Sun and the Nationalists would be unable to create a genuine republic, he offered them a *quid pro quo*; if Sun would stand down and acknowledge him as president, Yuan would use his military strength and political influence in Beijing to establish a workable republican constitution and persuade the Manchu to abdicate without further resistance.

The Qing abdication, February 1912

No clear account of the negotiations between Yuan and the Nationalists has survived, but it seems there were misgivings on both sides. However, once Sun Yatsen, who was very aware of how weak and poorly organised his Nationalist Party was, had expressed his willingness early in February to hand over the presidency to Yuan, the deal was struck. Yuan then presented an ultimatum to the Manchu dynasty: abdicate or be overthrown by force. There were hawks among the courtiers who urged that the dynasty should at least go down fighting, but the regent and Longyu, the **Dowager Empress**, refused to contemplate further bloodshed. On 12 February 1912 Longyu issued a formal abdication decree on behalf of the five-year-old Emperor Pu Yi.

By observing the nature of the people's aspirations we learn the will of heaven ... I have induced the emperor to yield his authority to the country as a whole, determining that there should be a constitutional republic. Yuan Shikai has full powers to organise a provisional Republican government to treat with the people's forces on the methods of achieving unity so that five races, Manchus, Mongols, Chinese, Muslims and Tibetans may continue together in one Chinese Republic with unimpaired territory.

Quid pro quo
Something for something, a balanced exchange.

Dowager Empress
The widow of the previous emperor, who kept her royal title as empress.

Key terms

Formal abdication of the Qing dynasty. Chinese Republic established:
12 February 1912

Key date