The Late
Qing Empire
in Global History

BY PAMELA KYLE CROSSLEY

| The Tongzhi Emperor | The Empress Dowager Xiaoqin (Cixi) | The Guangxu Emperor | The Xuantong Emperor, Puyi |

Nineteenth Century Qing Dynasty silver dollars, and background image of a bridge leading to the Summer Palace.
Image source: http://www.drben.net/ChinaReport/Sources/History/Qing/Descendancy_Summary_Qing_Dynasty_1644-1911AD.html.

The role of the Chinese empires in global history at the height of their economic power (roughly 1400–1800) has been well described in powerful books by Andre Gunder Frank, Kenneth Pomeranz, and Bin Wong. In that period, China's advanced technology and commercial economy, as well as access to their markets over sea and land, created a market that drove technological development, efficiency in industrial organization, and an increasing volume of long-distance trade. The effects were felt first in East Asia and Southeast Asia, but eventually powered the development of travel, trade, and finance throughout the Indian Ocean, and finally drew Europeans, eager to connect with the center of wealth, out of their continent and into the oceans. After roughly 1800, however, various factors caused China to lose its global economic leadership as it experienced social turmoil, economic fracturing, and the imposition of European imperialism. Global historians sometimes lose sight of the China thread between this threshold of 1800 and the appearance of modern China as an ascendant power in the late twentieth century, but there are many reasons why we should continue to see important trends and their effects reflected in the modern Chinese experience.

ENVIRONMENTAL DECAY

During the eighteenth century, China's population growth accurately reflected the doubling of global population, rising from about 150 million to a little over 300 million. Intense population pressures in southeast China gave rise not only to increased emigration to Taiwan and Southeast Asia, but also to a much more massive internal migration to provinces such as Sichuan and Shaanxi. Population growth and the redistribution of intense population complexes further up the Yellow River and the Yangzi caused demand for timber to soar. By the end of the eighteenth century, China's deforestation was nearly complete. For some decades in the early nineteenth century, the internal areas were not only able to absorb immigrants, but in fact experienced an agricultural boom, due in part to more widespread use of new crops such as corn (maize) and sweet potatoes, made available by trade with empires that had acquired the crops in Africa and in the Americas. By the 1850s, however, the new crops had only exhausted the soil of the few nutrients that the traditional crops had left behind, or, in the case of corn, depleted the soil to a far greater depth than rice, barley, or sorghum could. As fields failed and were abandoned, they added to the erosion problem that had already been aggravated by deforestation.

In 1855, the Yellow River changed course. This was not the first time it had done so, but the sixth (the seventh would come in 1938). Management of the Yellow River had been a preoccupation of governments based in China for thousands of years, since without periodic dredging, and in some cases embankment, the river becomes quickly silted by the light, sandy soil of northern China. The emperors of the early nineteenth century were aware of the acute need to maintain water works, whether in the case of the Yellow River or of the Grand Canal. The Imperial government had a long history of exact knowledge and practice of river management, including the damming of tributaries and release of the water to scour silt from the Yellow River's bottom.[1] But, declining finances and major political distractions, not least the Taiping War, as well as constant pressure from foreign governments for political and trade concessions, kept the Qing court from immediately dealing with river issues. The Yellow River course change in 1855 was only emblematic of the environmental problems in North China particularly, as temperatures dropped in mid-century and aridity rose. By the 1870s, drought and famine were acknowledged by regional governors as major and persisting problems. Refugees from collapsed local ecologies joined refugees from the war, bloating the populations of coastal and riverine cities, deserting some of the formerly most productive land, and contributing to the social disorders that afflicted the late Qing.

China's experiences of the late nineteenth century provide a model for understanding the causes and effects of environmental decay in many parts of the world in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Despite a high degree of specialized knowledge and a history of effective management, decades of neglected environmental stewardship, combined with short-term challenges such as climate change and war, pushed some regions of China into crisis. Today, management of the Yellow River remains a critical issue in China's environmental management program, as climate change is again evident. As China is now a bellwether of likely global environmental problems, so it was in the late Qing when history gives us clues to the origins of environmental patterns of the twentieth century.

CHINA ON THE FRONTIER OF MODERN WARFARE

China 's enormous civil war of the nineteenth century is insufficiently appreciated as a theater of modern warfare, as critical as the Crimean War (1853-56), the Indian Rebellion of 1857, or the American Civil War. The Taiping War (1850-1864) was the bloodiest conflict anywhere in the world before the twentieth century, and is still among the most destructive wars in history. Fatalities are estimated at 25 million to 40 million, out of a total population of roughly 340 million c.1860. The casualties were overwhelmingly civilian; most encounters consisted of months of siege warfare, with each side—whether locked up in a fortified city or camping outside the walls—using starvation as a weapon against each other.

The longest continuous siege was against the city of Nanjing, where the Taipings had not only created a base, but also a government and bureaucracy for themselves. Between 1854 and 1864, it stood as a state surrounded by the Qing Empire. The professed Christianity of the Taipings aroused the interest of governments in Europe and the United States for a time, and they considered the possibility of recognizing the new government. But disillusionment with Taiping beliefs and behavior, as well as a cold realization that the growing foreign investment in the Qing Empire as a unified entity was substantial, eventually led the interested foreign powers to

The Yellow River.
Image source: The *Damn Interesting* Web site at http://www.damninteresting.com/?p=436.

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send troops and mercenaries of their own to aid the empire in suppression of the Taipings. By 1860, substantial British and French forces were on scene, and other European, as well as American, advisors were on the way. They included Charles "Chinese" Gordon, Henry Burgevine, and Frederick Townsend Ward; they were among a class of mercenaries who circulated from the Crimean War, to the Indian Rebellion, to the Taiping War, and on to the American Civil war. The Taiping War, as much as these other venues, was part of the transition to modern industrialized warfare.

Before the arrival of the foreign troops, the Qing armies' artillery, from cannons to muskets, reflected European technology of decades past.[2] The new advisors and the participating armies brought knowledge of the new tools of combat: trenches, machine guns, repeating pistols, rifles, grenades, cable communication, and railroads. They brought weapons with them, and sold them to the Qing government for supply to the Imperial troops.

However, Taiping rebels quickly captured a portion of these supplies, including new types of weapons. The war ended within a few years, but the effects of the modernization of the military in China were permanent. In order to stop the Taiping advance and to regain lost ground, the Imperial government allowed regional governors unprecedented discretion to raise, arm, train, and deploy their own armies. Not all these armies were disbanded when the war was over; some governors developed a deep interest in the

training and outfitting of technologically and strategically advanced military units. In ensuing decades, the growth of provincial and regional armies became an element in the destruction of the Qing Empire, and in the shaping of the post-imperial political system.

EMPIRE AND NATIONALISM

The Qing Empire was one of the great land-based empires of the early-modern period. With the exception of the Mugal Empire, which ended in 1858, the remaining empires—Ottoman, Russian, and that of Austria-Hungary—all dissolved between 1912 and 1924. The Qing was the first to fall, and its patterns of nationalism and revolution tell us something about the phenomenon of the fall of the empires in general. As in the case of the other empires, the Qing was beset by a nineteenth century struggle between "modernizers" (or "Westernizers") and traditionalists. Nationalism emerged in China as it did in Russia and Turkey, from the modernizing party, who argued that the imperial form was obsolete, obstructing the "national" sensibilities of the majority population. The concept of national characteristics, however, was drawn in China (as in Russia, Turkey, and the late Austro-Hungarian regime) from the historical output, educational programs, and in some cases the legal strictures of the empires themselves. In the case of the Qing Empire, not only Han Chinese, but also Mongols, Manchus, and Tibetans, could draw upon the imperial legacy to establish fairly clear ideas of their distinct languages, religions, homelands, and aristocratic traditions.

Of the early modern land empires that dissolved within this time window, it appears that only the Qing Empire persisted as a national entity. The Ottoman Empire was eventually broken up into numerous countries, with Turkey going its way, the Balkans going theirs, and the Arab lands going another. Russia was divided into the national oblasts, eventually united under a federation structure. China is unique in going into the republican eras as a centrally unified state, based upon the imperial territories of the previous empire.

However, some qualification of this should be offered. First, imperial encroachment and nationalist movements within the empire had already fractured the unity of the empire before the outbreak of the Chinese nationalist revolt in October of 1911. One of the most dramatic losses was of the Qing northern Pacific coast, which was ceded to Russia by treaty in 1860, and

is now the Russian Maritime Province. In 1871, Russia seized part of Qing territory in East Turkestan (later Xinjiang province). Tibet was invaded by Britain in 1904. After a short-lived treaty between Britain and Tibet in 1906, and the payment of an indemnity by the Qing to Britain, international consensus subsequently forbade the signing of treaties with Tibet directly. Nevertheless, Britain continued to support Tibetan nationalists, resulting in the effective independence of Tibet from about 1905, and, secondarily, the British introduction of boundaries and agreements that still wreak havoc in relations between the People's Republic of China and India. Tibet was not formally a part of a centralized Chinese government again until 1951. In the case of Mongolia, the regional Buddhist leader established by the Qing declared independence in July 1911, establishing a theocratic state that survived until it became the Mongolian People's Republic in 1921. This took a very large swathe of Qing Inner Asia—the area once known as Outer Mongolia and now the Republic of Mongolia—out of Chinese control forever.

Nevertheless, the greater part of Qing Imperial territories came under the claim of the Republic of China, and under effective central control of the PRC in the 1950s. The nationalist impulses that arose within the empire in the late nineteenth century resembled the nationalist impulses arising in the Russian and Ottoman Empires, and fostered very similar secessionist and nationalist movements. The strains that have resulted from the re-absorption of these cultures and histories continues to affect the course of China's political and cultural life, and, as a byproduct, the political and cultural life of much of the rest of the world.

In these three respects as well as others, China in the late Qing period reflects dynamics common to the land empires of the early modern period. Between the demise of the Qing Empire in 1912 and the creation of the People's Republic in 1949, China continued to struggle with the late Qing conundrums of economic reconstruction, technological modernization, and the resistance of foreign military and commercial encroachment. Not only the problems, but many of the solutions, when they came, were rooted in the challenges of the late nineteenth century. ∎

NOTES

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Qing Territories 1800–1900
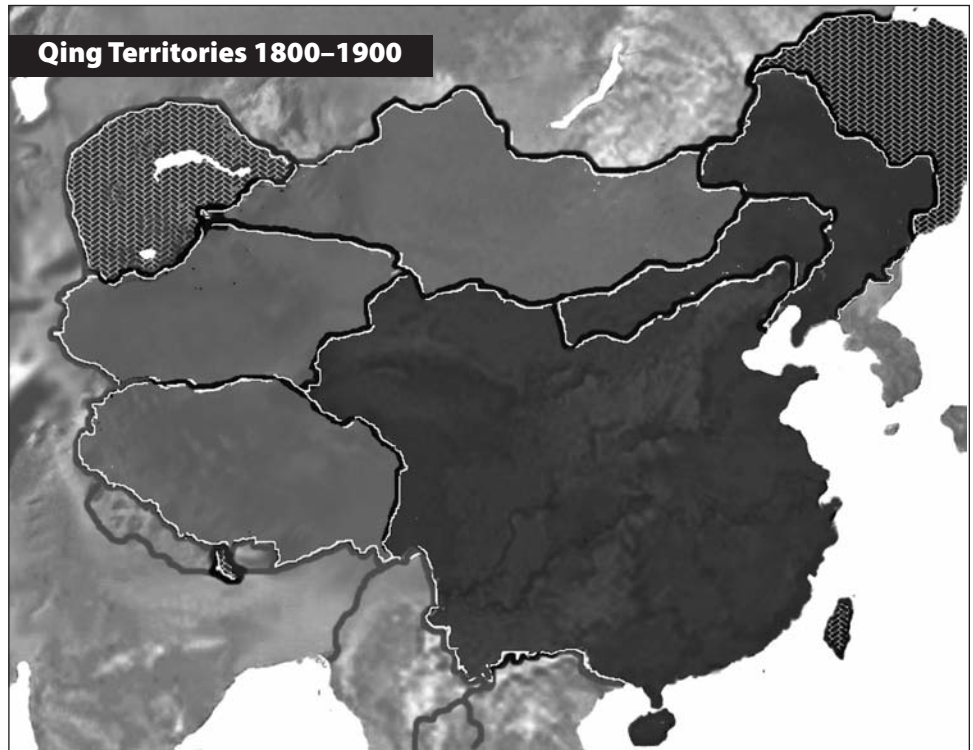
Directly governed Qing territories, 1800

Territories occupied, administered, or indirectly administered by the Qing by 1800

Qing territories held in 1800 but lost by 1900

ROC/PRC Territories 1935–1960
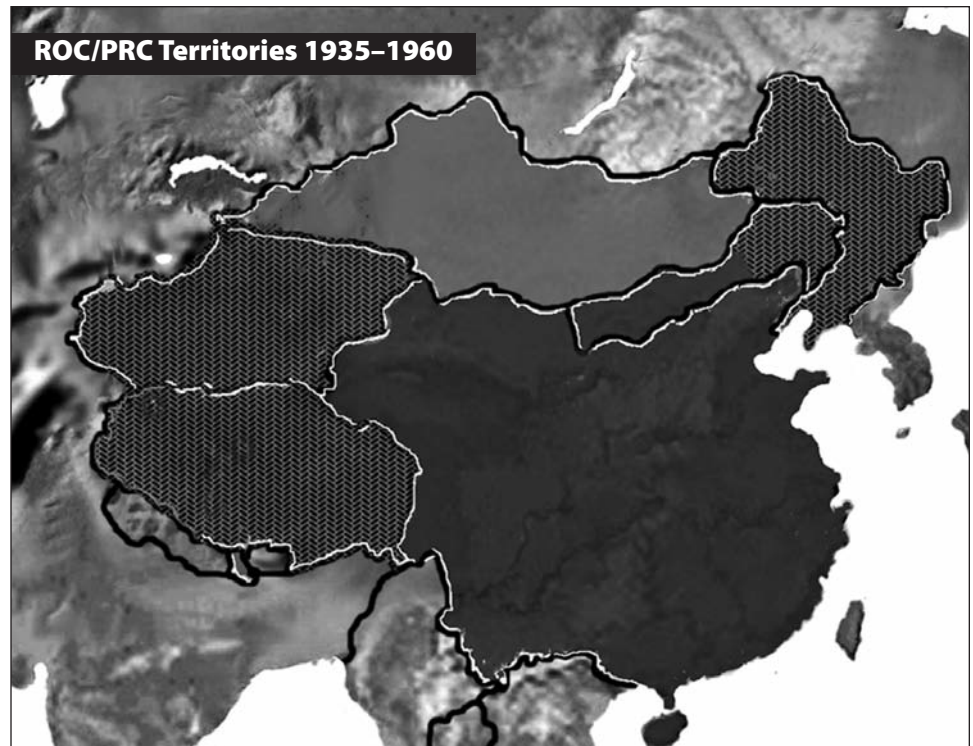
Territories governed by Republic of China, c. 1905

Former Qing territories not subsequently governed by the PRC

Former Qing territories disputed or independent c. 1935, now governed by the PRC

Map illustrations courtesy of Pamel Kyle Crossley.