

CHINA IN 1900

The Manchu dynasty

When the Chinese study their own history, they do not refer to dates as we do in the West. They divide their history into dynasties – periods of time when the country is ruled by one royal family.

In 1900 China was ruled by the Qing family. (*There is a guide to the pronunciation of Chinese names on page 47.*) As they originally came from Manchuria, north of China, their dynasty was also known as the Manchu dynasty.

The empire which the Manchus ruled had been in existence for over 2000 years. During that time the Chinese people had become one of the most advanced civilisations in the world. They were especially skilled in astronomy, mathematics, engineering and medicine; they were the first people to use paper and had invented printing; they were making porcelain and paper long before these skills were known in the West; silk-weaving, gunpowder, spectacles, the magnetic compass and the suspension bridge were all Chinese inventions.

European influence

By 1900, however, the Chinese empire had grown weak. The main reason for this was that European countries in the nineteenth century had gained great influence in its affairs by using force against China. Between 1839 and 1842 the British fought an 'Opium War' against China to force the Chinese to continue buying the drug opium from British-ruled India. In 1860, in a second Opium War, an Anglo-French army attacked Beijing, the capital of China, and burned down government buildings. In 1894–95 the Japanese struck at China, taking away Korea, Formosa (Taiwan) and Port Arthur (Lushun). After each of these wars the invaders forced the Manchus to sign '**unequal treaties**', giving them control of China's sea-ports and allowing them special trading privileges. By the end of the nineteenth century, fifty of China's ports were **treaty ports**, open to foreign trade and residence. In addition, the European powers had divided China up into what they called **spheres of influence**. This meant that in the British sphere, for example, British people had the biggest share of business, missionary work, transport, etc.

Not surprisingly, Europeans were very unpopular in China. Many Chinese blamed the Manchus for allowing China to be over-run by Europeans, and plotted to overthrow them. In 1850, for example, the Taiping Rebellion against the Manchus broke out. It lasted for fourteen years and was the worst in China's

long history. Between 1850 and 1864 vast areas of fertile land were laid waste, 600 cities were ruined, and 20 million people were killed. The Manchus were only able to put down the rebellion with European help, and this made them even more unpopular.

Reforms

In 1898 the Emperor Guangxu tried to strengthen China by modernising the way the empire was run. In a three month period known as the **Hundred Days of Reform**, Guangxu introduced new schools and colleges and a new examination system. He improved the government's budget and dismissed corrupt officials from the court. However, Guangxu's aunt, the Empress Dowager Cixi, opposed these changes. Helped by conservative court officials, Cixi had the Emperor imprisoned and forced him to grant her the power to rule China in his place.



The Empress Dowager Cixi photographed on the Dragon Throne of the Manchus in 1900. Note her long fingernails protected by sheaths, a symbol of social superiority since she clearly does not have to do manual work

The Boxer Rebellion, 1900

At the time of the Hundred Days of Reform, opposition to the Manchus was common throughout China. Many opponents of the Manchus also hated foreigners, especially Christians. Their discontent reached a peak when two successive harvests failed and the Yellow River flooded huge areas of farm land, causing a famine. Discontent boiled up into rebellion.

The rebellion was organised by a movement called Yi-Ho Tuan, meaning Righteous and Harmonious Militia. Because its members practised the martial arts, including boxing, they were known as Boxers. The Boxers blamed foreigners and Christians – ‘foreign devils’ as they called them – for the problems of China. They especially hated Chinese converts to Christianity. At first the Boxers also opposed the Manchus, but Empress Dowager Cixi cleverly won them over to her side by giving them official support and by encouraging them to attack foreigners.

The Boxer Rebellion reached a climax in 1900. When the Boxers killed Europeans and Christians whom they had captured, European governments sent an armed force to Beijing to protect their nationals. This European force, however, was defeated by a Chinese army cooperating with the Boxers. At the same time, a Boxer rising began in Beijing itself. Boxers attacked and burnt the French cathedral there, killing hundreds of Chinese Christians in the flames. In the Legation area, where foreign embassy officials and their families lived, the Boxers trapped nearly 1000 foreigners and kept them under siege for two months.

The European governments reacted angrily to the siege of the Legations. A six-nation force invaded China, captured and looted Beijing, and forced the Manchus to pay a fine of £67 million. Many captured Boxers were executed in the streets.

The crushing of the Boxers did not solve anybody’s problems. The harsh methods used by the Europeans to suppress the Boxers made many Chinese hate them even more. At the same time, the invasion and looting of Beijing once again showed how weak the Manchus were.



A Boxer about to be executed by beheading. One of many executions of Boxers in Beijing in 1900

After the Boxer Rebellion

Empress Dowager Cixi now realised that changes were necessary after all. In 1905 she began to modernise the education system. She created a New Army modelled on European armies. She promised the formation of a parliament and democratic elections. But these measures were too little and too late to save the Manchu dynasty. The anti-Manchu, anti-foreigner movement had spread to so many people that it was only a matter of time before the Manchus would be overthrown.

Work section

- A. Test your understanding of this chapter by explaining what these words and terms mean: dynasty; Manchus; ‘unequal treaties’; spheres of influence; Boxers.
- B. Study the photograph above. Then, using the information in this chapter as well as your own imagination, answer the following questions:
1. Name the organisation to which the condemned man belonged.
 2. What were the aims of this organisation?
 3. Suggest why this man was executed. Why do you think the execution was done in public?
 4. Suggest what thoughts were going through the minds of the onlookers at the moment when the photograph was taken.
 5. For what purposes do you think the photograph was taken? Explain your answer.