

# **An Ailing Empire: Maintaining the Qing Dynasty's Imperial Mandate into the Twentieth Century**

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Historians, we are told, focus only on facts.<sup>1</sup> Yet the central historiographical stipulation laid down in the nineteenth century regarding the primacy of objectivity has since softened with the more realistic acknowledgement that most forms of historical enquiry will naturally tend towards the subjective.<sup>2</sup> As John Tosh has written: 'Our priorities in the present should determine the questions we ask of the past, but not the answers.'<sup>3</sup> The historical record itself is arguably highly selective in that not all elements of history are necessarily remembered or preserved for a vast spectrum of reasons – some deliberate and some by chance. Consequently, in pursuing our historical enquiries, looking at both the primary and secondary source materials which we can find, we need to be aware that we are walking a fine line between pursuing current available 'trends' and distilling neat over-arching 'generalisations' from the information that is available to us. History is highly nuanced. A wide panorama can be envisaged both whole, or zoomed in upon to its most minute pixels, yet essentially all these layers and levels are the very stuff of history, and in sum or in part, they are what make up our perceptions of what the past was in the terms of our own here and now.

There are perhaps few topics in history quite as vast as the broad canvas which is represented by the word 'Empire.' In beginning to look at 'Empire,' it is arguable that this

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<sup>1</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), Lecture 1: The Historian and His Facts; John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (London: Longman, 2000), p. 30

<sup>2</sup> Writing in the 1830s, Leopold von Ranke stated that the task of the historian was 'simply to show how it really was (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*)': see, E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, p. 3; Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003), Chapter 3

<sup>3</sup> Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p. 32

term is loaded in our present day with largely negative connotations – whether we are looking at old empires such as political entities like the colonial administrations of the nineteenth century (e.g. those arising from the activities of the British or Dutch East India Companies), or even the vast corporate organisations which seek to dominate certain sectors of our modern-day consumer markets (e.g. Starbucks, Tesco, Nike, et al.), this is something which must be borne in mind.<sup>4</sup> Yet empires seem to be a recurring feature of global human society, and historians' opinions as to their positive and negative characteristics can be found rubbing alongside each other as much as in opposition.

Empires are the outward manifestation of the gathering, organisation, and implementation of political and economic control into a single corporate-social entity. If we take the colonial form of empire as our subject, we can perhaps broadly define this best as a single unified territory which is comprised of multiple ethnicities, nations, religions, cultures, markets, etc., controlled by a single point of authority or 'metropole.' How such empires arose and were maintained is where we can find both parallels and differences, for whilst all empires were essentially similar in character, they were also largely distinct in form.<sup>5</sup>

In examining the question of whether or not empires rule by force alone, I intend to look specifically at the rise of the Qing Empire in seventeenth-century China, alongside the subsequent rise of the period of Western incursions upon Qing sovereignty, the so-called era of 'Informal Empire', during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Throughout the long history of the Chinese Empire, historians and other social commentators have argued that there has essentially only ever been one underlying Chinese culture. Whilst the ethnicities of the Chinese Emperors may have changed – waxing and waning with the succession of each particular dynasty – it has been consistently asserted

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<sup>4</sup> Duncan Bell, 'Empire and Imperialism,' in Gregory Claeys & Gareth Stedman Jones (eds.), *The Cambridge History of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

<sup>5</sup> Jane Burbank & Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Frederick Cooper & Ann L. Stoler, 'Introduction Tensions of Empire: Colonial Control and Visions of Rule,' *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (November, 1989), pp. 609-621; Denis Judd, *Empire: The British Imperial Experience, from 1765 to the Present* (London: Harper Collins, 1996)

that to rule China all conquerors have had to adopt essentially Han Chinese ways.<sup>6</sup> And, as with many empires, the boundaries of the Chinese empire have expanded and contracted through time according to the political and military fortunes of the ruling elite, incorporating and to varying degrees assimilating its peripheral 'barbarian' peoples, or instituting tributary alliances with them.<sup>7</sup> The four main categories of the Chinese races besides the central Han population are usually designated as the Manchus in the northeast, the Mongols to the north, the 'Hui' (or Muslims) of the far northwest, and the Tibetans on the west side of the empire, with numerous other localised ethnic minorities ('minzu') incorporated throughout these peripheral regions too.<sup>8</sup>

The Qing was just such an 'alien' dynasty, deriving from the Jürched tribes people of the north-eastern region which eventually became known as Manchuria. Originally a nomadic forest people, the Jürched were descended from the same Tungusic linguistic stock as the founding Qin dynasty which ruled China from 1122 until they were conquered by Mongol forces in 1234.<sup>9</sup> As Albert Feuerwerker explains, the Qing were a nominally tributary people of the reigning Ming dynasty (1368-1644), a so-called frontier 'commandery' in the Ming military system: 'That is, the hereditary tribal leaders were invested with Chinese official titles and paraphernalia as part of a Ming effort to protect its northern frontiers against the Mongols and others by co-opting tribal military power into an administrative arrangement which the Chinese could hope to manipulate.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire, The Great Qing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 19-24

<sup>7</sup> Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005)

<sup>8</sup> The present government of the People's Republic of China has officially designated the Chinese nation as comprising fifty-six distinct ethnicities: see, Dru C. Gladney, 'Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities,' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 53, No.1 (February, 1994), pp. 92-123

<sup>9</sup> Albert Feuerwerker, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century China: The Ch'ing Empire in its Glory* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1976), Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies, No. 27, pp. 1-2

<sup>10</sup> Feuerwerker, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century China*, p. 4

The rise to pre-eminence of the Qing began with three successive tribal chieftains of the Aisin Gioro clan which would eventually secure for itself the 'Mandate of Heaven,' legitimately entitling them to assume the throne of the Chinese empire in their conquest of the Ming in 1644. Beginning with the chieftain, Nurhaci (1559-1626), and his sons, Abahai or Hong Taiji (1592-1643), and Dorgon (1612-1650), the clan managed to unite the Manchu state and organise its effective militarization, such that it was ideally positioned to exploit its advantage over the Ming during the rebellion led by Li Zicheng (c.1605-1645) which captured the Chinese capital, Peking (Beijing) in the Spring of 1644, prompting the suicide of the last Ming Emperor, Chongzhen (1627-1644). Li Zicheng's rapid ascent from petty bandit to successful rebel leader began in Shaanxi province and spread to the surrounding regions which were then burdened by heavy taxation and official corruption compounded by drought and famine. Gaining significant ground from 1642 onwards, he ultimately failed to gain any significant support from the social elite, and 'lacking a social program to consolidate his popular support, Li was never able to develop a solid political structure to translate his military successes against the decadent Ming armies into a viable alternative to the Ming government.'<sup>11</sup>

Unlike Li Zicheng, who was essentially a bandit who had garnered popular support, the forces of the Manchu State had managed to cohesively consolidate themselves into an efficient 'military-administrative structure which combined an improved Central Asian-type armed force with at least the skeleton of a Chinese-type governmental structure.'<sup>12</sup> Shortly after Li Zicheng had taken Peking, the Manchu leader, Dorgon, personally led the Manchu army through the Great Wall at Shanhaiguan, where they joined forces with those of the Ming General, Wu Sangui (1612-1678) in Liaodong, 'who chose to surrender to the Manchus

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<sup>11</sup> Feuerwerker, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century China*, p. 8

<sup>12</sup> Feuerwerker, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century China*, p. 7; see also, Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, p. 15-17, for a description of the creation of the Manchu 'Banner' system

rather than to the Chinese bandit.<sup>13</sup> Peking was then recaptured, thereby ousting the short tenure of Li Zicheng's primacy.

Whilst some former Ming generals proclaimed their allegiance to the new Qing dynasty, others resisted; and so the Qing continued to pursue various military campaigns deep into the Chinese heartlands for a further forty years, until they eventually secured their hold on China as a whole. As William Rowe points out, during this period it was at times uncertain that the Qing would ultimately prevail: 'The first of these competitors was the rump regime of the defeated dynasty itself, called the Southern Ming. The Ming practice of enfeoffing imperial princes in various localities throughout the empire had left a variety of candidates for succession on the death of the Chongzhen emperor in 1644, but it also virtually ensured that conflict would ensue over just who should be the focus of loyalist efforts.'<sup>14</sup>

Whilst the implementation of military force was undoubtedly the vehicle for the Qing gaining political hegemony over the Chinese empire, maintaining Qing rule would require a much more nuanced approach. A number of differing factors had to be adequately balanced – politically, economically, socially, culturally – just as much as militarily monitoring and dealing with the threats arising both within and beyond the empire's borders. Given their ethnic 'barbarian' status, modern historiography holds that race played a key part in defining the character of the Qing's rule over China.<sup>15</sup> Containing, and keeping content, such a melting pot of different ethnicities under one unified rule was essentially nothing new and

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<sup>13</sup> Feuerwerker, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century China*, p. 9; see also, Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, p. 18-19, where these events are reported slightly differently, with Wu Sangui withdrawing his troops from the Shanhaiguan Pass and returning to Peking to defeat Li Zicheng himself, thereby allowing the Manchu army (whom they had been successfully holding at bay for some considerable time already) into China and surrendering to Dorgon later

<sup>14</sup> Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, p. 24

<sup>15</sup> An example of this would be the current scholarly debates surrounding the so-called 'New Qing History' proposed by historians such as Harvard University's Professor Mark C. Elliott: see, Elisa Nesossi, "Why the Manchus Matter – In Conversation with Mark Elliott," *The China Story* (18 January 2013), <http://www.thechinastory.org/2013/01/why-the-manchus-matter-in-conversation-with-mark-elliott/> (accessed 20 January 2013)

had been the challenge posed to each previous ruling dynasty. The Qing would need to set about stamping its mark upon the empire in order to define itself.

Rebellions, such as the one led by Li Zicheng against the Ming, were a familiar theme and continued into the Qing era as well. During the nineteenth century alone the Qing dynasty had to contend with major rebellions, such as a Muslim uprising in Yunnan from 1855 to 1873, as well as another Muslim rebellion in the northwest from 1862 to 1873, the Nien rebellion of 1853-1868, and the Taiping rebellion of 1850-1864 (as well as two confrontations with external forces in the so-called 'Opium Wars' of 1839-1842 and 1856-1860).<sup>16</sup> Yet the Qing's strategy for the consolidation of its rule was played out through a number of deliberately calculated policies which were implemented either by force or by coercion. In 1645, Dorgon, now acting as Regent to the newly installed Shunzhi Emperor (1638-1661), then only six years old, issued the following imperial edict:

Within and without, we are one family. The Emperor is like the father, and the people are like his sons. The father and the sons are of the same body; how can they be different from one another? If they are not as one then it will be as if they had two hearts and would they then not be like the people of different countries? ... All residents of the capital and its vicinity will fulfil the order to shave their heads within ten days of this proclamation. For Zhili and other provinces compliance must take place within ten days of receipt of the order from the Board of Rites. Those who follow this order belong to our country; those who hesitate will be considered treasonous bandits and will be heavily penalized. Anyone who attempts to evade this order or who uses cunning language to argue against it will not be lightly dealt with.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 16; Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832-1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), Chapter 4

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, pp. 22-23

This edict forcing the male population of the wider Chinese empire to adopt the traditional hairstyle of the northeast, known as the 'queue,' where the forehead is shaved and the remaining hair gathered into a long braid worn down the centre of the person's back, was highly resented by the Han Chinese. It was not simply a humiliating assertion of Manchu dominance over their subject peoples, it was also seen as a direct affront to the Confucian values which formed the very basis of Chinese culture. Shaving their foreheads like this was seen as 'a form of self-mutilation and a breach of filial obligation owed to the parents who had bequeathed them their bodies.'<sup>18</sup> Revolts and social unrest instigated by opposition to this decree subsequently brought about incidents of violent repression and even wholesale massacres perpetrated by the Qing military which would long be remembered and bitterly resurface once again during the eventual demise of the dynasty several centuries later.<sup>19</sup> Whilst the Qing may have initiated certain policies instituting their ethnic or cultural pre-eminence, they were also mindful of the overriding value of adopting Confucian social mores and adapting certain administrative structures – such as the famous system of civil service examinations – which they had inherited from their predecessors, the Ming.<sup>20</sup> In this sense the acculturation that occurred at the beginning of the Qing era was effectively a two-way process.

The key factor though was to secure the assistance of the social elite, the so-called 'literati' class, who remained entrenched in their local interests. If the literati could be successfully coerced or co-opted into supporting the Qing's centralised bureaucracy the Qing would be able to use them to consolidate the means of imperial governance, primarily through the collection of taxes and the implementation of the Qing's code of law.<sup>21</sup> They did this by reforming the structure of the civil service inherited from the Ming, overlaying it with their own system which itself had originally been based upon, and developed from, the Ming

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<sup>18</sup> Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, p. 23

<sup>19</sup> Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, pp. 23-24

<sup>20</sup> Feuerwerker, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century China*, pp. 12-33

<sup>21</sup> Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, pp. 27-28

system prior to the Qing conquest.<sup>22</sup> Instead of continuing the practice of 'enfeoffing' local princes, the Qing instituted a two tier system of government in which there was a centralised bureaucracy comprised of the imperial court, and an outer circuit of regional governors. These governors were responsible for their respective regions and their subordinate magistrates and administrators, they were directly answerable to the emperor, but also operated with a large degree of personal autonomy. Avoidance of corruption and self-aggrandisement amongst these officials was a continuing key concern of the imperial court, as Rowe explains: 'Thus, territorial administration under the Qing was an elaborate system of checks and balances designed to ensure effective central control over officials in the field. Governors and governors-general duplicated one another's efforts and monitored one another's obedience to central directives; functional specialists did the same for general administrators; military officials performed this oversight function for their civil counterparts; superiors submitted annual reports on the performance of their subordinates; and territorially specialized censors in the capital looked over everyone's shoulders all the while.'<sup>23</sup>

The central pillar to ensuring the efficacy of this so-called 'law of avoidance' was the principle that incumbent officials should operate under a degree of separation from their native areas of direct influence; consequently '[a]lthough officials were, almost of necessity, wealthy landholders and lineage leaders in their own right, their economic and social power centered on their distant native place, not on the jurisdiction where they served at the pleasure of their imperial master.'<sup>24</sup> In other words an imperial official could never serve in

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<sup>22</sup> Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, pp. 33-48

<sup>23</sup> Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, p. 38

<sup>24</sup> Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, p. 38



his native province, and likewise, they were moved around the empire with systematic frequency in order to avoid them settling too comfortably in one place.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, the outer ring of Qing bureaucracy, which was still vigorously expansionist in terms of its imperial ambition, were administered under the principle of overlapping jurisdictions with elaborate checks and balances. Yet, unlike the previous Ming administration:

It was the first organ in China's imperial history created specifically to administer areas outside of China proper – Mongolia, Tibet, and so on – which the Qing now claimed as integral parts of its empire. [...] Han literati were almost entirely excluded from this critical institution, and much of its operation was conducted in languages other than Chinese.<sup>26</sup>

The centralised Qing authority has been viewed by many as a typical example of a despotic regime which maintained its uncompromising hold on power by a policy of 'divide and rule.' But necessarily such policies and such success would perhaps inevitably draw resentment from within as well as exploitative (or even 'greedy') attention from without. Indeed, in the nineteenth century both of these issues would come to a head in deliberate challenges to the imperial court; challenges both to legitimacy of the Qing's right to govern, and its ability to effectively maintain its hold on that power of governance which the Qing had originally won through conquest.

In 1792, Lord Macartney (1737-1806) was appointed by the British Government to lead an embassy to the Chinese imperial court with the purpose of establishing a diplomatic friendship between the British and Chinese empires, thereby also aiming to open up trade

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<sup>25</sup> An interesting account of how these regional administrative systems operated under the Qing is given in a noted micro-history by Jonathan Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang* (London: Quercus, 2008), originally published in 1978

<sup>26</sup> Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, p. 39

with China, and, it was hoped, establish a British ambassador in Peking.<sup>27</sup> Macartney's embassy, which consisted of three ships with some 800 people on-board – diplomats, soldiers, scientists, artists, and their servants – was expected to dazzle Qianlong (1711-1799), the then Chinese Emperor, with the artistic, scientific, and technological fruits born of the Western 'Enlightenment' era, yet it ended in what has since become perhaps one of the most famous diplomatic put-downs in history. Instead of being over-awed by the marvels of Western science and innovation, the disinterested Qianlong Emperor simply perceived the British as yet another distant and peripheral barbarian people who, quite naturally, had come to the Chinese throne to court imperial favour by seeking to establish their tributary fealty to the august 'Son of Heaven.' The failure of this embassy was in fact simply a prelude to the cultural and philosophical divide between East and West which was set to dominate the global politics of the nineteenth century.

By this time, the expansion of Western imperialism was making significant in-roads into East Asia. Trade was ostensibly the driving purpose of the Western imperialists' expansion. Initially the Qing Court grudgingly allowed various foreign enterprises to reside in the southern port of Canton (Guangzhou), a location deemed suitably far enough away from the imperial capital at Peking not to cause the ruling elite too much trouble. Yet, from the foreigners' perspective, it was sufficiently remote enough to ensure marked discontent amongst the various nationalities allowed to set up trading stations there. For the British in particular, their trade with China was growing, but it was very much a one-sided affair in the sense that the growing British fondness for tea ensured a steady flow of capital into the coffers of Chinese tea plantations and their traders, whilst the wider Chinese market seemed resiliently impervious to anything that the British might have to offer other than silver by way of trade. The British East India Company tried to break into the Chinese consumer market with commodities such as cotton and woollen fabrics famously manufactured in the

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<sup>27</sup> See, Aubrey Singer, *The Lion and The Dragon: The Story of the First British Embassy to the Court of the Emperor Qianlong in Peking, 1792-1794* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1992)

new industrial mills of north England, or with the sale of advanced precision instruments such as those crafted by British clockmakers, but it was only when Bengal in India came into the Company's possession that sufficient quantities of a commodity distinctly desirable to the Chinese was finally found.<sup>28</sup> That commodity was opium.

Opium was no new innovation for the Chinese. The narcotic had long formed a part of their social elite's 'literati' culture. Consequently, the demand was already there, but the import of opium had been proscribed by the Qing authorities in 1729, and so a roundabout trade network began to develop between Britain and the Company's possessions in Bengal and the smaller, coastal traders between India and China. The increased flow of the drug into China effectively reversed the flow of capital, enriching British coffers with silver instead, and simultaneously it had the knock-on effect of broadening and deepening the dependency on opium which began to pervade throughout all classes of China's population. Besides from moral and practical issues, China's steadily increasing opium addiction began to destabilise local economies, and so opium became a serious worry to the Qing authorities. The governor-general of Hunnan and Hubei, Lin Zexu (1785-1850) was sent to Canton, charged with the task of investigating the illegal drug trade there. He took drastic countermeasures, enforcing a crackdown on smokers and smugglers alike, and effectively blockaded the Western trading concessions there. This in turn escalated the dispute into a major diplomatic incident which brought to a head the stalemate between the British and Chinese respective imperial outlooks, as well as their perceptions of – and their intentions towards – one another. In many ways, as various historians have suggested, it was just the kind of opportunity that the British had been looking for. As Julia Lovell explains:

This conflict of interest was in due course rationalized by Britain's mercantile war party into honourable justification for international armed conflict. Over the key months of 1839-40 (when the Cabinet took the decision to go to war), the

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<sup>28</sup> Bickers, *The Scramble for China*, p. 29

unwillingness of British merchants to play by another state's rules on that state's territory (the very issue triggering the factory siege) was publicly recast as something far nobler. A well-orchestrated pamphlet and press campaign turned their cause into the modern free world's righteous resistance to an evil empire fossilised into an ancient superiority complex and determined to keep the forces of civilisation and progress at bay.<sup>29</sup>

Hostilities broke out when the British despatched an expeditionary force from its colonial possessions in India in the first of two conflicts which have since become known as the Opium Wars. When hostilities in the first conflict ceased with the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, the British had succeeded in compelling the Qing rulers to open their empire to the expansion of trade, with the later establishment of a series of treaty ports in which the western powers could reside and trade under their own national jurisdictions, beyond the influence of Chinese law. It also ceded the territory of Hong Kong to the British in perpetuity, and forced the Qing to recognise and finally allow foreign diplomatic representation to reside at Peking.<sup>30</sup> This system of 'extraterritoriality' also facilitated the continuation of the illicit opium trade. Writing of his arrival in China in 1855, the Scottish missionary, the Rev. Alexander Williamson (1829-1890), noted the persistence of the trade by means of 'opium hulks' moored off shore:

There are seven receiving ships of that nature lying at Woosung, and they are heavily armed and manned. The East India Company and other merchants dare not land the opium in China, and they have therefore adopted this subterfuge. Fast clipper ships from India bring the opium and it is put on board these vessels, and

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<sup>29</sup> Julia Lovell, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 78; see also, Arthur Waley, *The Opium War Through Chinese Eyes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958)

<sup>30</sup> For an excellent recent analysis of this system of extraterritoriality and international legal systems: see, Pär Kristoffer Cassel, *Grounds of Judgement: Extraterritoriality and Imperial Power in Nineteenth-Century China and Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

then native Chinese boats and merchant's boats come and get it from them. It is a nefarious and deadly traffic. Would that it were stopped.<sup>31</sup>

This system of extraterritoriality has since become viewed by historians as somewhat of a hybrid form of imperialism, now increasingly referred to as 'informal empire.' The term 'informal empire' is said to have originally been coined by the otherwise little-known historian, Charles Ryle Fay (1884-1961), describing the process whereby 'European powers could exploit overseas areas economically without going to the trouble and expense of outright annexation (or 'formal empire').'<sup>32</sup> Indeed, unlike India, China was never fully colonised by the West. Instead, imperial powers – arguably led by the British – established their own quasi-colonial centres of influence in the designated treaty ports originally scattered along the China coast, but later extended to places inland, particularly along the course of the Yangtze River. Within these settlements the European, American, and Japanese imperial powers set up their own consulates which exercised legal jurisdiction over their own subject nationalities, or, by agreement, those of their fellow imperial counterparts where direct representation was not available. These consulates were charged with the oversight of foreign trade in their respective treaty ports, and were also meant to convene courts in order to administer legal supervision of their Western subjects, whilst maintaining diplomatic contacts with the regional Qing governors-general and local Chinese magistrates. Each imperial power also set up a 'Legation' close to the Chinese Imperial Court in Peking with a Minister who was responsible for all official diplomatic relations between the Chinese Foreign Office (or the 'Tsunli Yamen' as it was then referred to) and their respective centres of government or 'metropolises.' According to the terms of the Treaty of Nanjing, the foreign

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<sup>31</sup> Paul King (ed.), *Voyaging to China in 1855 & 1904: A Contrast in Travel* (London: Heath Cranton, 1936), p. 68

<sup>32</sup> Prof. Doug Monro, 'Review of Hugh Gault, *The Quirky Dr Fay: A Remarkable Life* (Cambridge: Gretton Books, 2011),' on the IHR website: *Reviews in History* (November 2012), <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1344> (accessed 20 January 2013)

powers were all protected by a 'most favoured nation' clause, whereby any concession which was granted by the Qing to one power would accordingly automatically be afforded to all the others as well.<sup>33</sup>

The enforcement of their perceived treaty rights were the abiding preoccupation of the foreign legations and consulates.<sup>34</sup> Minor disagreements and misunderstandings on these rights would occasionally flare into conflicts of varying proportions, sometimes resulting in the implementation of so-called 'gun boat diplomacy,' in which foreign military forces – which had also been granted the right to patrol the Chinese seaboard and enter certain Chinese riverine and canal systems – would take direct and often fatal action with relative impunity.<sup>35</sup> It was an uneasy situation which naturally garnered deep resentment and occasional resistance from the Qing authorities and the Chinese population at large. Yet, contentiously, it was also one in which some Chinese realised they could also personally profit.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, the Chinese population in certain foreign settlements swelled with time, most notably in Shanghai which represented the largest focal point of the international community in China.<sup>37</sup>

If the Western imperial presence in China was not the result of outright conquest, as with the case of the Qing supplanting the Ming in 1644, the situation in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries was, like the Qing's early acculturation with the Ming, a subtle two-way process. In order to maintain their political primacy and thereby their legitimate claim to government, the Qing were to a certain extent arguably complicit in their accommodation of the 'treaty port' system.<sup>38</sup> Following on from the Qing's initial flippant

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<sup>33</sup> See, P.D. Coates, *The China Consuls: British Consular Officers, 1843-1943* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1988)

<sup>34</sup> Loren Brandt, 'Reflections on China's Late 19th and Early 20th-Century Economy,' *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 150 (June, 1997), pp. 282-308

<sup>35</sup> See, Burbank & Cooper, *Empires in World History*, pp. 294-301

<sup>36</sup> Rhoads Murphey, 'The Treaty Ports and China's Modernization,' in Mark Elvin & G. William Skinner (eds.), *The Chinese City Between Two Worlds* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 20-21

<sup>37</sup> See, Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism, 1900-1949* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999)

<sup>38</sup> Murphey, *The Treaty Ports and China's Modernization*, p. 22

dismissal of foreign emissaries due to their self-perceived cultural supremacy over such foreign powers during the eighteenth century, they had eventually come to realise the actual supremacy of these unwanted outsiders – at least in military terms – during the Opium Wars. Thereby the treaty ports were a compromise between outright conquest and the Qing's continued hold on power. Whilst the Qing certainly continued to harbour the belief that they would one day finally succeed in throwing the foreign powers out of China, they also realised that these unwanted foreign settler communities could be used in the immediate term to maintain the Qing's own authority. A neat instance of this dichotomy can be seen in the Qing's respective handling of two internal rebellions arising in the 1850s and 1900s.

The first rebellion, known as the Taiping rebellion of 1850-1864, arose in the south of China. Its leader, Hong Xiuquan (1814-1864), a quasi-Christian convert who apparently believed himself to be 'the brother of Jesus Christ,' inspired a messianic movement to establish a new Chinese dynasty with himself proclaimed as 'Heavenly King.' The Taipings, like Li Zicheng before, garnered popular support from the perceived apathy, corruption, and repression perpetrated by the Qing authorities. The Taipings quickly gained ground and soon posed a real threat to the Qing establishment. Initially the Western powers were unsure whether or not to welcome the Taipings, particularly in light of their adoption/adaptation of Western religious beliefs; but when the Taipings finally reached Shanghai and thereby posed a clear and present danger to foreign interests there, the foreign community chose to support the Qing. The French and British joined forces, establishing the 'Ever Victorious Army,' a force of Chinese soldiers trained and led by General Charles Gordon (1833-1885), which assisted the Qing in overthrowing the Taipings.<sup>39</sup>

The second rebellion, known as the Boxer Rebellion, which occurred between 1898 and 1901, is thought to have begun as an uprising born of discontent with Qing concessions

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<sup>39</sup> See, Stephen R. Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, The West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2012)

to the foreign powers which were seen as favouring foreign missionaries and the increasing numbers of Chinese Christian converts by appropriating land and property from other ordinary Chinese, but which was successfully co-opted by the Qing and skilfully redirected towards the foreign presence in China. These foreign enclaves perceived the actions of the Qing's central and regional administrators as providing tacit support and even encouragement to the Boxer movement.<sup>40</sup> This reinforced the foreign imperialists' already entrenched doubts as to the trustworthiness of Qing diplomacy. Indeed, '[t]he Boxer rising located these fears squarely on the Chinese, on the perceived mass 'fanaticism' of the ordinary people, and on the alleged 'treacherous duplicity' of China's leaders.'<sup>41</sup> The uprising culminated in violent attacks on the foreign communities in China and the famous siege of the foreign legations in Peking. Conflict ensued. Western military powers marched on the capital and relieved the legations. The subsequent peace treaty protocols and the 'Boxer Indemnity' which the Qing were forced to sign and pay exacted further crippling restrictions on Chinese sovereignty – all to the advantage and deepening entrenchment of the foreign 'informal empire.'<sup>42</sup>

Within its own direct sphere of influence – 'borders' perhaps being too definite a term – these foreign communities, the *entrepôts* of a growing global capitalist system of enterprise, perhaps naturally looked to the Western systems of imperialism (of which they were undoubtedly an off-shoot) for guidance and example in the practical matters of their own self-governance.<sup>43</sup> As 'settler communities' they were certainly autonomous social entities, but they remained tied to the disparate 'metropole' centres of their various motherlands, and, as such, they were to a degree reliant upon this imperial backing – without the diplomatic representation and naval support of their 'home' countries these

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<sup>40</sup> Bickers, *The Scramble for China*, pp. 343-348

<sup>41</sup> Bickers, *Britain in China*, p. 44

<sup>42</sup> Peter Fleming, *The Siege at Peking* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001), pp. 246-251

<sup>43</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, 'Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (January, 1989), pp. 134-161



foreign 'China Hands' would never have secured, nor continued to maintain their grasp upon an ailing Chinese empire.<sup>44</sup>

The British dominated the foreign presence in China. They instituted and made up the majority sitting on the Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC). They also comprised the majority of the nationalities working in the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service – frequently referring and deferring to the 'metropole' centres of British Hong Kong and British India, as well as the Foreign Office in London. And, in such circumstances, as with many instruments of empire before them, the policy of 'divide and rule' proved the most efficacious. The international settlement at Shanghai required its own police force, and so the SMC recruited directly from the British colonies. Sikh policemen became a familiar sight there directing traffic – they were suitably removed from the Western and Chinese populations to act as intermediaries in fulfilling this function, and they added to the complex mix of China's racial and ethnic hierarchies already mentioned.<sup>45</sup> The Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service was originally instituted to collect maritime trade taxes on behalf of the Qing during the disruptions of the Taiping era, but was largely staffed at the senior level by foreigners and at lower levels by Chinese. It allowed the Qing the pretence of saving 'face' by creating a certain condescending distance, thereby dealing rather more indirectly with foreign merchants, whilst also allowing the foreign merchants to feel they could better trust the integrity of the Chinese tax system – it was, in actuality, yet another lever alongside the unequal treaties which the West could employ in its interactions with the Qing.<sup>46</sup> Here again, we can see that the establishment of empire by force can, to a certain extent, be

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<sup>44</sup> See, Robert Bickers, *Britain in China*, Chapter 3

<sup>45</sup> Isabella Jackson, 'The Raj on Nanjing Road: Sikh Policemen in Treaty-Port Shanghai,' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 6 (November, 2012), pp. 1672-1704

<sup>46</sup> See, Donna Brunero, *Britain's Imperial Cornerstone in China: The Chinese Maritime Customs Service, 1854-1949* (London: Routledge, 2006). It is interesting to note how Sir Robert Hart (1835-1911), Inspector General of the Chinese Customs, liked to arbitrarily move his Commissioners around China much as the Qing imperial court administered its own regional governors-general – effectively to keep them on their toes: see, Paul King, *In the Chinese Customs Service: A Personal Record of Forty-Seven Years* (London: Heath Cranton, 1930), esp. p. 245

maintained by force too; but it must necessarily also employ more subtle means of social policy and cultural accommodation in order to maintain and perpetuate its hold on local power. In this sense, perhaps, 'informal empire' is no different from 'formal empire.'

To return to my opening point, taken from John Tosh, that historical enquiry should take its priorities from the present when looking at the past, what conclusions can we draw today from this short but wide-ranging survey of the Qing and Western forms of empire in China?

Certainly, as I have posited at the start of this essay, history is deeply nuanced. We can employ many different techniques, and focus from any number of different angles on whichever aspect or theme of history we wish to examine in our search for historical facts, but, whatever conclusions we draw – the past will always inform the present. This interaction is an ever-evolving process. In this sense, history is never static. Facts can stand or fall in the process of examination or interpretation, but it is still those historical facts which have shaped our present world into what we understand or how we perceive it to be. Discussions of race and ethnicity are still as central to China's identity today as it was when the Qing decreed that all males should adopt the queue hairstyle – as is aptly demonstrated by a recent incident in which Yan Chongnian, a Chinese historian accused of being an 'apologist' for the Qing's oppressive policies and extolling their racial superiority in comparison to the Han, was physically attacked by a fellow Chinese reader at a book-signing event in 2008.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, China's current, burgeoning economy and its comparable recent global rise in terms of political influence can be linked to the initial influence towards 'modernisation' first introduced to China by the foreign treaty ports and given impetus in the opportunities which they created for entrepreneurial and forward-thinking, progressive

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<sup>47</sup> See, Eric Mu, "The Slapped Historian Speaks," *Danwei: Chinese Media, Advertising, and Urban Life* (9 October 2008), [http://www.danwei.org/front\\_page\\_of\\_the\\_day/yan\\_chongnian.php](http://www.danwei.org/front_page_of_the_day/yan_chongnian.php) (accessed 20 January 2013)

Chinese during the first half of the twentieth-century.<sup>48</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that the various revolutionary movements which eventually succeeded in toppling the Qing's hold on power first found the fertile soil in which to grow in cities such as Canton and Shanghai. And perhaps, because they were still essentially Chinese in culture, these movements were far better placed to effect the changes needed to assume the mandate – whether heavenly or popular – which is clearly required in order to govern China as a whole.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ahren Lester, 'Empire on the Eastern Sea: The Influence of Asian and Western Imperialism on National Identity Formation in Japan and China,' *Emergence*, Vol. 4 (Autumn, 2012), pp. 1-6

<sup>49</sup> Murphey, *The Treaty Ports and China's Modernization*, p. 27