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## TRADITIONAL CHINA

China in the 19th century was ruled by a Manchu dynasty, the Qing (Ch'ing)\* dynasty, which had taken power after the country was conquered by Manchurian invaders in 1644. The Manchu dynasty in China lasted for 268 years, until 1912 when the dynasty collapsed and a Chinese Republic was established. From their capital at Beijing (Peking) the Manchus ruled an empire which included Tibet, Mongolia, Xinjiang (Sinkiang), as well as Manchuria and China itself. The Manchus also made Korea, Burma, Nepal and Annam (Vietnam) into dependent tribute states.

Although the Manchus were outnumbered 50 to 1 by the Chinese, they were able to maintain their control over the country by incorporating Chinese personnel into their administrative structure. Indeed, about 90% of the administrators of the Qing dynasty were Chinese. However, during the 19th century the Manchus themselves became 'sinocised', that is, they absorbed Chinese culture and practices, and lost much of their separate identity.

### The structure of government

At the head of the imperial government in Beijing was the Manchu emperor who was regarded as having received the 'mandate of heaven' to rule, and was seen as the intermediary between heaven and the people. The emperor possessed absolute power and owed his obedience only to heaven. Nevertheless, he employed a number of advisory groups to help him decide central policy. These included a group known as the Grand Council, as well as other groups whose task it was to formulate policy on public works, national finance, war and the like.

Below the emperor and his advisers was a structure of imperial administration which radiated out from the centre. The further from the centre, the weaker the power and authority became. This imperial administration was staffed by a specially trained and selected class of scholar gentry.

Whilst in theory the emperor's power was absolute, in practice it was limited by tradition, and by the fact that poor communications gave regional administrators and army commanders in China a good deal of independent power. Indeed, one of the great problems throughout the period of the Qing dynasty was that of keeping a firm control over distant provinces, and ensuring the loyalty of provincial governors and army commanders.

The Qing ruled China through a provincial administrative structure headed by governors who were appointed by the imperial government to rule each of China's

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\* All Chinese names are spelt according to the Pinyin system of Romanised spelling. The Wade-Giles equivalent is provided in brackets the first time each name is used, e.g. Beijing (Peking)

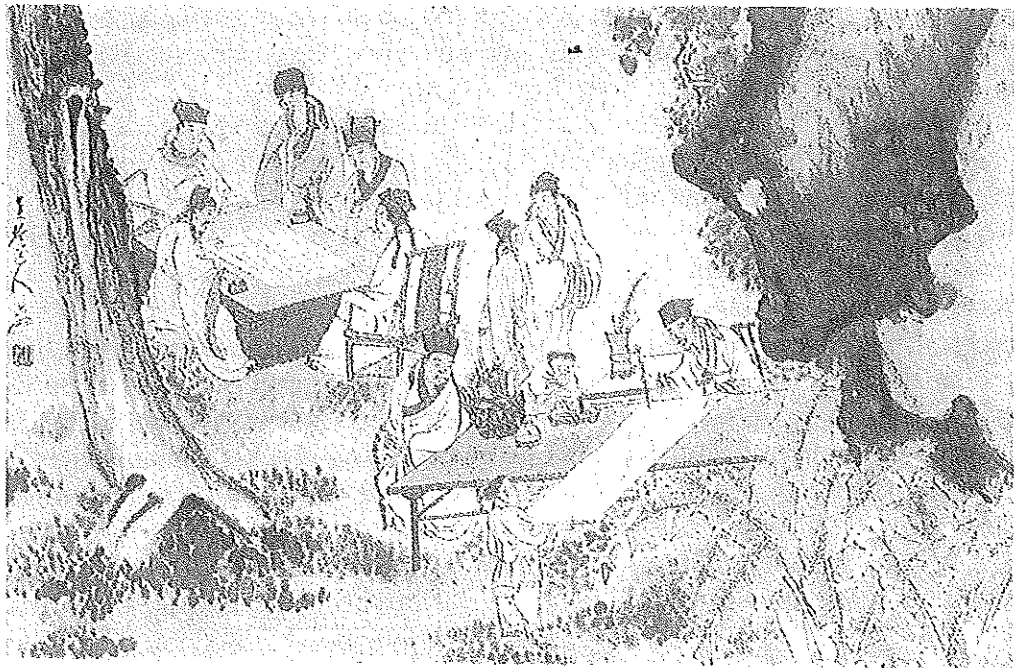
18 provinces. So that the governors did not become too powerful and independent, the administration of each province included senior officials appointed by the central government in Beijing. These officials were answerable to the imperial government, not the provincial governor. This division of authority between local officials and imperial officials sent from Beijing was also used in the army to ensure that no army commander gained too much independent power.

The lowest level of administration was carried out by magistrates, who were drawn from the scholar gentry class, and who administered local government districts. China's 18 provinces were divided into 1500 local government districts, each of which was administered by a magistrate whose job was to gather taxes, supervise public works and to maintain law and order.

### **The scholar gentry**

The dominant class in Chinese society, and the class which ran the imperial administration, was the scholar gentry. This small elite gained its position not from any hereditary claim but through passing a series of rigorous examinations based on the works of Confucius. These examinations were held at four levels and at each level a successful candidate was granted a degree and gained social status, as well as the chance to enter the imperial administration and China's ruling class. The first examination was held at a county centre, the second at the provincial capital, the third at the imperial capital, and the fourth before the emperor himself. They were extremely difficult and sometimes candidates actually died of stress whilst sitting them. Very few ever reached the fourth level.

The imperial examinations were open to all classes but, because it was expensive to acquire sufficient education to pass them, they were in reality the preserve of the rich. Although the sons of peasants and artisans could attempt the examinations,



Chinese scholars

the sons of the scholar gentry itself had an advantage, for only they had the opportunity for thorough preparation.

The examination system did not involve practical subjects, but was based on the assumption that knowledge of the principles of Confucius would provide sufficient moral and mental preparation for a career in imperial administration.

### The social structure

Whilst the great mass of Chinese were commoners, their status within society varied according to the task they performed.

In the predominantly agricultural society of traditional China the top rank of commoner was held by the peasant farmers who were considered the most important group in society after the scholars. The Chinese peasant was a free man, not bound in any feudal fashion to a lord, paying taxes, and having obligations only to the imperial government. However, because the pressure of China's huge population meant that there was little surplus agricultural produce left after immediate needs were met, peasants were rarely well off and most lived in considerable poverty.

Below the peasant the next rank of commoner was the artisan, followed by the merchant. Despite their prosperity, merchants had little social status in Chinese society and were regarded as a parasitic class. The next class down the scale were soldiers who had a very low social status. Only the military leaders, who were members of the scholar gentry class, were held in high esteem. The lowest class of Chinese were those involved in menial tasks and this group included actors.

### The economy

The Chinese economy in the 19th century was based on the agricultural production of the peasant farmers. There was very little industry.



Wet rice agriculture (left) and water pump (right)

China's population during the time of the Qing dynasty expanded from 100 million people in 1644 to about 360 million in 1911. This huge population depended on the production of food in the limited areas suitable for intensive agriculture. The primary agricultural regions were the great river basins of the Huang He (Yellow) River, the Yangzi (Yangtze) River, and the Xi (Hsi) River. Most of China's people lived in villages which were concentrated in these productive areas. The Yangzi River basin, for instance, was the country's most productive area and contained about half of its population. The principal crop grown in these southern river basins was rice, while tea, which became China's principal export crop, was grown along the lower reaches of the Yangzi River.

The principal food crops grown on China's northern plain were wheat and millet.



Confucius

### **Confucianism**

Chinese society and government were shaped and structured by the ideas of the philosopher Confucius, who lived between about 551 B.C. and 479 B.C. Confucianism was not a religion but a code of social behaviour designed to create the conditions necessary for an ordered and stable society. Confucianism deals with the relationship between individuals and groups, and between each of these and the state. It is a philosophy of life for the individual, as well as a political philosophy for the good government of the state. Its aim is to foster both social and political harmony.

The central institution of Chinese society was the family, and Confucius emphasised the obligations which existed within families such as that of children to

parents and wife to husband. Outside the family Confucius recognised the obligations friends had to each other. This then was a very traditional and conservative philosophy which stressed the obligation of youth to aged, female to male, and promoted the ideas of respect, loyalty and self-discipline.

Confucian philosophy extended beyond the obligations of members of the family to each other and provided a code for the relationship between the ruler and his subjects. Whilst Confucius argued the need for only one political authority, in China's case the emperor, he did stress that the ruler had an obligation to act in the interests of his subjects. This political philosophy was central to the function of China's government. The emperor was seen as being the son of heaven who ruled with heaven's mandate, so long as he acted responsibly. However, if the emperor's rule were incompetent then this could be interpreted as being an indication that the 'mandate of heaven' had been withdrawn. In such circumstances, Confucianism taught that the people had the right to rebel to overthrow the ruling dynasty. In the event of a national disaster such as war, famine, or invasion, the Chinese people could interpret the event as signifying the withdrawal of the 'mandate of heaven' from the ruling dynasty, and could justly rebel to remove that dynasty. If they succeeded, a new dynasty replaced the old. If they failed, they were regarded as traitors and suffered the consequences.

### **The Middle Kingdom and the world**

China has had its own distinctive civilisation for over 3000 years and throughout most of that time its level of civilisation and technical knowledge was far in advance of anything known in the West. Until the arrival of the Western powers in the early 19th century China was effectively isolated from the outside world, and was easily able to overwhelm and dominate its neighbours.

The 18 provinces of China proper were known collectively as the 'Middle Kingdom'. Traditional China was more a civilisation founded on Confucianism, than a nation state like those of the West. Nevertheless the Middle Kingdom dominated those peoples and territories that adjoined it and these areas became dependencies of it. Thus Korea, Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang (Sinkiang), Tibet, Turkestan, Annam (Vietnam) and periodically Burma and Siam (Thailand) were dependent states. Their rulers had to acknowledge their dependent status by paying tribute to the Emperor of China. Tribute was a kind of tax extracted from the dependent states and usually took the form of goods such as furs and jade. From time to time one of these dependent states managed to invade and overwhelm China itself and establish its own dynasty in Beijing. The Mongolians did so in 1279 under Kublai Khan, and the Manchurians did so in 1644 when they established the Qing dynasty.

China throughout her long history had enjoyed an almost total isolation from the rest of Asia, and from Europe and the world at large. Her geographical position meant that she was cut off from the world by the sea on her eastern border, the desert and steppe country to her north, and the mountainous region of Tibet on her southwestern frontier.

China's isolation, combined with the dominance of the Middle Kingdom over her dependent states, gave her rulers a distorted and unrealistic view of the world and of China's position in it. China's ruling class was ignorant of the rest of the world and regarded their civilisation as the only worthwhile one existing. They also thought that the Chinese system of government was superior to all others. The

Chinese regarded all who lived beyond the Middle Kingdom as barbarians. Qing dynasty laws forbade people to emigrate and would not allow foreigners to live in China.

In traditional Chinese society, merchants were held in low regard and trading relations with outsiders were not considered important or valuable by the imperial government.

Throughout most of the long period of her civilisation China had been superior to the West in most aspects of technology. This was certainly true until the 17th century. However, by the 19th century China had fallen behind, particularly in the area of military technology. When the Western powers arrived and demanded that China open its doors to trade, the people were neither psychologically nor militarily prepared for the challenge that confronted them.

### **Early Western contact with China**

Contact between China and the West dates back to Roman times and has continued ever since on an intermittent basis, varying in its intensity during the ensuing centuries. The Romans traded with the Chinese for silk, but after silk-growing was established in Europe this trade died away and was replaced by trading contacts with Arabs, who introduced Chinese tea to Europe.

Before the arrival of European merchants in the 16th century, contact between the West and China was mainly the preserve of Christian missionaries. Christianity had been introduced into China in the 7th century from Persia and was represented by the Nestorian Christian church which enjoyed considerable success until it was suppressed because of a fear that it was undermining Chinese institutions. The Chinese rulers were never comfortable with a creed which stressed that people owed their allegiance to God first and civil authority second. In the 13th century the first Catholic missionaries, the Franciscans, arrived in China. They succeeded in making thousands of converts but were suppressed during the 14th century. In the 16th century, Jesuit missionaries arrived and again attempted to establish Christianity in China. This effort was relatively successful and the Jesuits were followed by the missionaries of many other Catholic orders. By 1700 it is estimated that there were 300 000 Christians in China. However, in 1724, Christianity was once again banned.

In 1514, Portuguese explorers reached China and shortly afterwards they attempted to establish trading relations, their first approach being repelled by the Chinese. Nevertheless the Portuguese persisted and in 1557 they established themselves at Macao at the mouth of the Pearl River, just south of the city of Guangzhou (Canton). The Russians managed to negotiate a treaty with the Chinese in 1689 shortly after the Dutch had successfully established their own trading relations with China. The first attempt by the British to trade with China was made in 1637, but it was not until 1699 that the first British post was set up in Guangzhou.

### **The Guangzhou (Canton) trading system**

The Western merchants who tried to establish a trading relationship with China met with strong resistance from the Chinese government which was very suspicious of people it regarded as barbarians, people it called 'foreign devils'. The Chinese rulers placed little value on commerce and trade and wanted nothing from the West because the Chinese economy was self-sufficient. Chinese officials refused to open

all but one post to trade with Western merchants. Foreigners were allowed to conduct business only through Guangzhou, but because the imperial government was determined to limit and control the activities of the European merchants, all trade had to be conducted through a group of Chinese merchants who were organised in a monopoly known as the Co-Hong. Thus the Chinese authorities had one organisation in place to conduct trade with the Europeans. The Co-Hong could be easily taxed and it could be held accountable for the behaviour of the foreigners. Trade with the Co-Hong was initially dominated by the Portuguese but they were eventually supplanted by the Dutch and then by the British.

British trade with China was at first conducted through the East India Company. However, in 1833, the British government withdrew the monopoly of the East India Company and individual British merchants were free to conduct their own trade with China. Another development which occurred in the early 19th century was the arrival of American merchants who also began a successful trading connection with the Co-Hong.

### **Problems with the Guangzhou system**

Although the Co-Hong system of trade was conducted to the financial advantage of both sides, it did produce friction. The Chinese officials regarded foreign merchants as inferiors whose trading activities with China were the result of an act of generosity by the Middle Kingdom, not the fulfilment of a right. However the European merchants, particularly the British believed they had a right to trade.

A further complication was added by the Chinese belief that Europeans were inferiors, the equivalent of people from one of the Middle Kingdom's tribute states. People who were regarded as inferior were treated as such by Chinese officials. Of course the Europeans, and particularly the British, who dominated the Co-Hong trade, did not see themselves as inferiors, and regarded the restrictions placed in their way as a denial of their rights. The restrictions included a refusal by Chinese officials to allow foreign merchants to enter the city of Guangzhou. Foreigners were confined to the special factory areas established on the edge of the city. A 'factory' in this case was a warehouse, residence and office building. Foreigners could only leave the factory area on three days per month to go for a walk in a nearby park. Furthermore, trading could only be conducted from November to March, after which time foreign merchants had to leave the city and return home, or to Macao, which the Chinese had sealed off with a wall.

### **The Macartney and Amherst missions**

In response to the complaints of British merchants about the difficulties that they encountered in China, the British government attempted to open diplomatic relations with the imperial government in Beijing and to establish a formal trading relationship between the two countries. A diplomatic mission was dispatched to China in 1793 led by Lord Macartney, and another, the Amherst mission was undertaken in 1816. Both failed. The Qing Emperor responded to a letter carried to him by Macartney from King George III of Britain as if he were writing to the leader of a minor tribute state, rather than to the leader of the world's dominant maritime and industrial power.

The Chinese government totally misunderstood the challenge that confronted it at the outset of the 19th century. It viewed the Middle Kingdom as the leading power in the world, despite all indications to the contrary. It conducted its affairs

in almost total ignorance of the international scene and of China's considerable technical backwardness.

For their part the British saw that they had three courses of action open to them. They could accept the terms demanded by the Chinese and continue to tolerate the treatment they received; they could abandon their trade with China; or they could use military force and impose their own conditions on the Chinese. They chose the last course.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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- 1 Name the dynasty which ruled China between 1644 and 1912.
- 2 Who headed the imperial government in Beijing?
- 3 How was the emperor's absolute power limited in practice?
- 4 Which officials carried out the lowest level of administration?
- 5 Which was the dominant class in Chinese society?
- 6 Where were each of the four levels of imperial examinations conducted?
- 7 Which group in Chinese society formed the top rank of the commoner class?
- 8 What was the Chinese economy in the 19th century based on?
- 9 Name China's three great river basins.
- 10 Name the philosopher whose ideas shaped Chinese society and government.
- 11 What right did the people possess if the emperor's rule were incompetent and it were judged that the mandate of heaven had been withdrawn?
- 12 What was the 'Middle Kingdom'?
- 13 How did the rulers of China's dependent states acknowledge their dependent status?
- 14 Which factors gave rise to the distorted and unrealistic view of the world held by China's rulers?
- 15 How did China's rulers regard those people who lived beyond the Middle Kingdom?
- 16 Why did Chinese rulers never feel comfortable with Christianity?
- 17 Name the group of Chinese merchants who were organised into a trading monopoly at Guangzhou.
- 18 Which European nation dominated the Co-Hong trade at Guangzhou in the early 19th century?
- 19 What restrictions did the Chinese government place on the activities of foreign merchants working in Guangzhou?
- 20 Who did the British government send to China in 1793 to open diplomatic and trading relations between Britain and China?