

Introduction

I began teaching the history of modern China in the spring of 2002 and have always posed a question to my students in the first lecture: 'Why are you here?' The answer given has been similar whether at the University of Pennsylvania (2002–2004), the National University of Singapore (2004–2006) or the University of Manchester (since 2007): 'Whatever I do after I graduate, it might have something to do with China'. The economic reforms of the post-Mao period have generated a renewed interest in Chinese history. This interest, along with the desire for practical knowledge, has driven up the number of students registering for modules on Chinese history at the University of Manchester, with numbers rising from less than 30 in 2007 to nearly 150, half of the History Department's intake, in the past few years. Indeed, many of my past students from all three institutions have since moved to live and work in China. These students bravely ventured out of their comfort zone to study something completely new; many had not learnt a thing about the 'Middle Kingdom' in their secondary education. Their enthusiasm as they followed me up the levels, and even onto postgraduate studies, inspired me to do more for them.

Historians often begin to tell the story of modern China from the eve of the First Opium War (1839–1842), when the Middle Kingdom was under Manchu rule. We cannot understand modern China without understanding the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Hunter-gatherers from what is today's north-east China, the Manchus replaced the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and ruled the Middle Kingdom until 1911. This was not the first time the Manchus had established their rule in China; their ancestors constituted the Jin dynasty (1115–1234), until they were swept away by the Mongols, who established the Yuan dynasty (1272–1368). Alien rule is not uncommon in Chinese history as China's neighbours took advantage of its political vacuums and military weakness, and laid their hands on valuable resources. China has faced constant threats from its northern neighbours for the past two millennia. That is why many Chinese regimes built and rebuilt the Great Wall – to deter the advance of those they referred to as 'barbarians'. The Manchus called their conquering of China a 'great enterprise'. They were organised under the Eight Banners – their unique combination of civilian and

military systems; each Banner group was led by a prince and was identified by the colour of its flag.¹

But conquering China was an easier task for the Manchus than governing it; neither their ancestors nor the Mongols held it for historically long periods. The Manchus found themselves ruling over a land that consisted of a very diverse range of geographies, climates, foods, languages and cultures, and a wide variety of peoples, who practised religions unknown to them; the majority of the population were Han Chinese, who worshipped ancestors and Confucius. China's economy was based on agriculture, cash cropping, household industries, trade and commerce. More importantly, its polity was managed by a fleet of scholar-officials, who passed three levels of imperial examinations, through which the best and the brightest were selected to govern. The early Qing Emperors, Shunzhi, Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong, worked hard and learnt quickly on the job. Their reign, from 1644 to 1799, is normally referred to as the early Qing. They subscribed to Confucianism and more or less followed the Ming system, which pleased the Han Chinese elite and scholars, many of whom came to accept their alien rulers. They were also innovative, letting the Banner warriors control the country but leaving the civil administration in the hands of Chinese scholar-officials.

The early Qing regime introduced a series of policies to restore the economy and agricultural production to feed the increasing population as conquest gave way to peace and development. To ease the burden of rapid population growth, the regime encouraged and facilitated migration to newly conquered and remote areas where land was available. They also encouraged diversification in food production, and maize and the sweet potato came to supplement rice and wheat; these had been brought to Asia by Europeans, and then to China by overseas Chinese. The early Qing period saw the arrival of more European traders; they purchased large quantities of silk, porcelain and tea, among other things. China accepted only silver as payment. As Europeans dressed, dined and drank better, China became silver rich, as little was bought from the Europeans in return. This would later cause problems.

The growth of the population meant more demand for consumer goods, which drove the increased production of cash crops and handicraft/household industries. Trade and commerce were in the hands of commercial guilds. Their guildhalls can be found in many big cities; Beijing alone was home to more than 100, specialising in everything from paper to salt. As urbanisation intensified there was a consumer revolution, in which many cultures flourished, from fashion to food. Wuhan is a good example of this process, as it grew from a small town during the early Ming into a cosmopolitan emporium (like Chicago in the United States) and transportation hub, as it sits in the heart of central China.

1 Frederic Wakeman Jr, *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

Commerce and consumption led to the emergence of large banks and affiliated services, such as security agencies, around the country. Foreign trade brought European goods and commodities from Southeast Asia, such as clocks and opium. Rich consumers began to explore these expensive and exotic foreign goods, as they were considered status symbols. More wealth meant more schooling, more learning and more examination candidates.

The early Emperors patronised the arts and literature, whether for their own pleasure or to show how Chinese they were, by compiling dictionaries and sponsoring literary works. The Qianlong Emperor is said to have written more than 20,000 poems. The early Qing Emperors were interested in what Europe had to offer; they retained the Jesuit missionaries who had been admitted by the Ming dynasty and took advantage of their skills, from clock-making and mathematics to classical music. They commissioned the Jesuits to produce paintings, European musical instruments and even palaces. Many Catholic missionaries, Jean Joseph Marie Amiot for example, worked for the Qing court until their death and were buried in Beijing, and many were showered with gifts and privileges. The early Qing alone testifies to my claim that China was not a 'Walled Kingdom', closed to the outside world, before the First Opium War, even though its openness came with caveats.² From the 1580s, when they first entered China, to the eve of the Anglo-Chinese conflict, Catholic missionaries operated not just in the Qing court and the capital, but also in the far-flung reaches of the empire.

The early Qing Emperors campaigned to secure the borders. They enlarged the map of China, bringing Mongolia, Xinjiang (New Dominion), Taiwan and Tibet into the orbit of the empire. Early Qing China appeared awesome and powerful; its wealth and sophistication seduced not just its neighbours, but also an increasing number of Europeans. The early Qing court continued the age-old Chinese practice of tribute trade, as many foreign missions came bearing gifts and conducting official trade while in China. This giving of tributes was not just a form of trade but also a means of diplomacy, as the royal ceremonies and gifts given in return overawed the foreigners, hence keeping them under control. It seems that the Manchus had done better than the Ming. Eminent historian Charles Hucker delivered this verdict:

For the first century and a half of their rule the Manchus gave China good government and strong leadership, so that Chinese life flourished in every regard. In the eighteenth century China attained the last golden age of the imperial tradition and very likely was the most awe-inspiring state in the world.³

2 Witold Rodzinski, *The Walled Kingdom: A History of China from 2000 BC to the Present* (Waukegan [IL]: Fontana Press, 1991); Zheng Yangwen, *China on the Sea: How the Maritime World Shaped Modern China* (Boston: Brill, 2011).

3 Charles Hucker, *China's Imperial Past: An Introduction to Chinese History and Culture* (London: Duckworth, 1975), p. 296.

But all was not well for the Manchus by the late eighteenth century, and the verdict on the late Qing period, roughly 1800 to 1911, would be quite the reverse. The early Qing regime was able to grow the economy and increase food supply, but these policies were executed by watchful and capable Emperors. Once they were gone, China would become the 'land of famine', as the population continued to grow and the ecological consequences of exhaustive cultivation became manifest.⁴ The legendary Banner warriors were long gone by the mid-Qing; their descendants were born and lived in privilege. Few cared about fighting; Manchu military power dwindled. The thriving foreign trade and wealth were now dependent on a single commodity: tea. This would lead to a trade deficit and problems beyond trade. Although small-scale industrialisation had begun, there was little technological innovation. The family-based business model prevented the kind of capital accumulation that had been a hallmark of industrial revolutions in Europe. The growth of the early Qing was replaced by stagnation, the consequences of which would become manifest in the late Qing, when domestic rebellion and foreign intrusion would bring the decline and end of Manchu rule.

The late Qing thus stands in sharp contrast with the early Qing. The lessons presented in this volume tell the story of the Qing dynasty's decline and chart the transformation of modern China from the First Opium War to the era of Xi Jinping, the present General Secretary of the Communist Party. They follow a chronological order; this is important, as they provide a clear timeline on which students can easily locate events, characters and major issues. Every lesson begins with a thought-provoking vignette that highlights the theme of the lesson. It then proceeds to tell the main story, supported by primary sources. I have chosen to use primary sources provided by ordinary people in my effort to integrate 'small' people's history into the larger narrative – my answer to the challenge of lecturing on big history with concrete details, and to student complaints that existing survey books do not provide primary sources and specifics. The lessons will also facilitate seminar discussions. Translations from Chinese sources are my own unless stated otherwise; they try to be as faithful as possible to the original texts so that they retain their texture and flavour. Each lesson is complemented with a few images, many never used before, fresh from research libraries and newly opened special collections.

Chinese characters are transliterated into pinyin, rather than the old Wade-Giles spelling; for example, Nanjing (pinyin) replaces Nanking (Wade-Giles spelling), but the Treaty of Nanking remains as it is because it was thus signed. Chinese names are listed in their Chinese order – Mao Zedong, rather than Zedong Mao – but this does not apply to footnotes, where authors are listed the way they are published. More than a decade of teaching has made me aware that

4 Walter H. Mallory, *China: Land of Famine* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1926 first edition).

it might be easy for students to learn about a historical event and its characters, but it is often not easy for them to navigate the maze of growing scholarship and academic debates. These will be introduced in the final section of each lesson, headed 'Mapping the Scholarship'. That section is not a bibliography like those in the syllabus which students have complained about for being just a list of books. Neither is it an annotated bibliography. It introduces readers to existing scholarship and key debates just enough for them to embark on independent research, where they will undoubtedly discover more on their own, and write essays and dissertations where they are expected to come up with their own arguments and conclusions.

Lesson 1 sets the stage for modern China, as it traces the origins, identifies the theatres and outlines the consequences of the two Opium Wars. We cannot understand modern China without understanding these Anglo-Chinese conflicts, which raised the curtain on modern China. European powers came, not exactly to rule, but to pursue and safeguard their economic interests. The dynamics and processes that were sparked by their interaction would come to dominate the history of modern China over the course of the next century. The desire for trade led the British to knock on the Chinese door; in their wake came the Protestant missionaries, who were eager for new converts. Lesson 2 focuses on the coming of the Protestant brand of Christianity and the Chinese effort at Sinicising this foreign religion. This was taken to the extreme by the Taiping Rebellion, led by Hong Xiuquan, who proclaimed himself 'God's Chinese son'. Despite that affair and its disastrous consequences, the late Qing saw the emergence of Chinese intellectual-spiritual leaders who continued to redefine Christianity for local use, bringing about the Sinicisation of which the Jesuits had long dreamt.

Foreign threats and the inability to suppress rebellions made the late Qing court and its scholar-officials see the need for change – the focus of Lesson 3. Late Qing reform under the names of the Tongzhi Restoration and the Self-Strengthening Movement was part and parcel of late Qing politics. But reform was reactionary, ad hoc, limited; and it was subjected to Empress Dowager Cixi's political needs and ends as she used it to orchestrate her rise to and stay in power. While reform enriched Japan, it brought more defeat and humiliation for China. Lesson 4 looks at the 'scramble for China', when more Western powers and Japan used their military prowess to demand their share of the Chinese pie.⁵ Region by region, these empire-building powers claimed their sphere of influence and made their presence felt. The Boxer Protocol, discussed in Lesson 4, is a defining example of Western imperialism at its worst. This contributed to the rise of nationalism and united many Chinese in their common stance against the imperialists and the Manchus; it gave them a political platform.

5 Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire 1832–1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).

Lesson 5 examines what I call the 'Age of Revolution' in modern China. This period saw the 1911 Wuchang Uprising, followed by a series of revolutions, political, intellectual, commercial and socio-cultural. Although nationalism led to the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, it did not see the birth of the kind of new modern nation many had wished for. Intellectual revolutionaries questioned the soundness of China's age-old political philosophy and blamed Confucianism for the nation's woes, while the country disintegrated into warlord rule. Lesson 6 studies that disintegration as warlords, Nationalists, Communists and the Japanese all battled it out for control of China in the four decades after 1911. This reminds us of the Warring States period (475–221 BC), when more than 100 small kingdoms fought for control of China. In the first half of the twentieth century, manmade disasters were compounded by natural calamities. The real casualties of four decades of war were the ordinary people; their misery was made all the worse by the frequent natural disasters.

Following this period of fighting, the unlikely winners, the Communists, emerged triumphant in 1949, to be the new masters of China. Lesson 7 takes on the Mao era from the political, economic, cultural and diplomatic perspectives. Its paramount leader subjected the Chinese people, intellectuals in particular, to waves of political cleansing. The Communist Party failed its people and the economy, but it did not fail its Third World friends. Mao did not successfully make the transition from rebel leader to executive of a modern nation, but Deng Xiaoping did. Lesson 8 surveys the post-Mao era from the perspectives of politics, economics and international relations. The Deng regime launched economic reform and pulled many out of poverty as China developed into the second largest economy in the world in less than three decades – a real 'Great Leap Forward'. But reform also brought problems. It led to a widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. Much like the late Qing reform, post-Mao economic reform was conducted in the absence of political change.

More than a century of reform and revolution changed China; this can best be seen in the lives of Chinese women. Lesson 9 charts their long march to modernity. Progressive intellectuals believed that in China women had always been oppressed. Women's liberation became a political platform for both the Nationalist and the Communist regimes, but women were not really liberated until the post-Mao era, at a time when women's liberation stopped being an ideological platform for the state. What irony! Change can also be seen through the transformations of sport, the performing arts and the Chinese family – all considered in Lesson 10. Like women's liberation, these areas were political platforms for the Communist regime; their modernisation was politicised as a result. They are windows through which we can gauge China, and they offer unique insights. However, more than a century of reform and revolution did not change everything; some people and cultures are more resistant than others. The post-Mao era offers hindsight unavailable to us before and can teach important lessons.

This book recounts national and even international history; it does so by privileging local, individual and ordinary tales. It charts China's transformation from political, social, cultural, economic, military and diplomatic perspectives; it also features religion, the diaspora, the environment, sport and performing arts at important junctions. It focuses on the transition as experienced by the Chinese people, including women, children and ethnic minorities; it also considers the foreigners who played important roles. It examines major events and characters, but it also tries to connect them, to allow the *longue durée* picture to emerge. It tries to tease out the dominant themes; it also entertains diverse hypotheses. It highlights crises but also records achievements. It acknowledges existing scholarship but also asks provoking questions that challenge established views. *Ten Lessons in Modern Chinese History* is not just food for students who study China and Chinese history, but also mental furniture for anyone who is interested in what our future world might look like.