

UNIT 2 - THE LAST DYNASTY AND THE FIRST REPUBLIC

ABOUT THIS UNIT

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 - *Pu Yi - the last emperor*
- *Establishment of Republic of China*
 - *Dr Sun Yat-sen - "Father of the Republic"*
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Introduction

For most its 2,000 years under an imperial dynasty system, China was a fairly successful, unified political entity. It is true that there were periods of decline and civil war, especially towards the end of each dynastic cycle, and that the country was several times conquered and ruled by northern "barbarians". Nevertheless, even the foreign-led dynasties, such as the Qing (Manchu), adopted Chinese ways and became in essence Chinese. The country looked upon itself as the civilised centre of the world – hence the Chinese name for China, Zhongguo, or Middle Kingdom.

Towards the end of the 19th century, however, a series of events took place that resulted in the collapse of this Qing dynasty and set the scene, albeit slowly, for China's eventual transition into the very different communist political system under Mao Zedong.

Fall of Qing (Manchu) Dynasty (1644–1912)



Figure 2.1
Territory of Qing China in 1892

The Manchus invaded China from Manchuria in 1644 and established the Qing dynasty, which ruled China for over 250 years. History records that, during the last hundred years or so, this once powerful dynasty began to unravel until it finally collapsed in 1912. How did that happen?

The two Opium Wars of 1839–42 and 1856–60, the Taiping Rebellion of 1850–64, and the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 had greatly eroded the Qing power base; and many Western countries were already eyeing China as another rich target for colonial expansion. The United Kingdom, France, Russia, Japan, and others were attempting to establish spheres of influence, settlements, and trading posts, mainly in major trading ports, such as Shanghai and Tianjin. Western troops had even burnt down the Imperial Palace in Beijing in 1860.

These colonisation efforts came comparatively later to China than to other parts of the world, mainly because of the country's vastness and logistical difficulties. The Boxer Rebellion that occurred at the end of the 19th century proved to be a significant catalyst in the collapse of the imperial system.

Boxer Rebellion (1898–1900)

Towards the end of the 19th century, when such powerful nations as the United States, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, and Russia were intensifying their colonial ambitions in China, many Chinese became upset by these foreign incursions.



Figure 2.2
Boxer Forces 1900

A secret society called "Righteous and Harmonious Fists", mainly thugs from the north who were more commonly known as the Boxers, roamed the countryside. They attacked factories and shops that sold foreign goods, as well as killing missionaries and many Christian converts. The Boxers' main aim was the elimination of all "foreign devils" in China.

Matters took a more serious turn in June 1900 when the Boxers, backed by imperial troops, overran Beijing, massacred Christians, burned buildings, and besieged the foreign settlements in Tianjin. Eventually, a large international force, mostly Japanese, under the overall command of the German field marshal, Count Alfred von Waldersee, relieved the siege of Beijing and routed the Boxers and the imperial regiments.

After the Boxer Rebellion, necessary reform programs, which had been ignored for so long by the Qing rulers, were at last implemented. These included reform of the education system with abolition of the centuries old civil service exams, publication of annual budgets, creation of provincial assemblies, and the enactment of a new code of law. A completely new political landscape was now taking shape in China, for which the Boxer Rebellion had been a

catalyst.

Empress Dowager Cixi (1834–1908)

The colourful life of the Empress Dowager Cixi is the stuff of great fiction novels, except that she was very real indeed. Rising as she did from a sixteen-year-old concubine, she assumed considerable power as a regent to successive young emperors over several decades.

Cixi was the favourite concubine of Emperor Xianfeng. After his death in 1861, she became the regent for her infant son Tung Chi; and after her son's death in 1874, she continued as regent for her young nephew Guang Xu when he ascended the throne in 1881. By keeping the young emperor in virtual seclusion and not allowing him to meet foreign dignitaries, Cixi remained the real power behind the throne until her death in 1908.

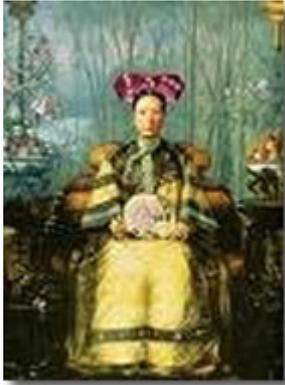


Figure 2.3
Empress Dowager Cixi

Although not a Boxer, Cixi was sympathetic to their cause, as she viewed all foreign emissaries in China as troublemakers. In the Boxer movement, she saw the possibility of eliminating foreigners without the need for imperial intervention. She acquired the nickname "Old Buddha" and continually worked to frustrate the government's late 19th century reforms and modernisation program. This alienated the people, not only in Beijing and in other cities, but also throughout the peasant community. Her manipulative skills, inveterate intrigues, and ambitions for power, combined with her apparent sympathy with the Boxers, were to play a significant role in the fall of the last dynasty.



Figure 2.4 Empress Dowager Cixi
Official Portrait

Until her death, Cixi continued to exercise considerable influence over the emperor. She meddled in state affairs, played foreign powers off against one another, and attempted to control government policy. One of her most notorious acts was to use funds allocated to upgrade the Chinese navy to rebuild the Summer Palace, including the marble boat, a structure that is still a major tourist sight for Beijing visitors.

Empress Dowager Cixi died suddenly on 15 November 1908. Coincidentally, one day before her death, Emperor Guang Xu, for whom she had acted as regent, had also died, presumably poisoned on her orders in revenge for his previous reform initiatives, which she had vigorously opposed.

Her last official act was to choose her young grand-nephew Pu Yi to succeed to the throne. As the last emperor, the three-year-old Pu Yi reigned as Emperor Xuantong, with his father as regent.

Destiny then played a part, and his reign was cut short by an army revolt that broke out on the Double Tenth – 10 October 1911, the tenth day of the tenth month. The Qing governor-general and military commander fled, leaving a general public perception that time had indeed run out for the Qing dynasty; and in February 1912, the child emperor Pu Yi was forced to abdicate. A republic was proclaimed with Sun Yat-sen as provisional president, succeeded shortly after by the warlord General Yuan Shikai.

Pu Yi: the Last Emperor (1906–1967)

The three-year-old child emperor, Pu Yi, was to become a private citizen in later years and work as a gardener in Beijing's botanical gardens – a story presented, perhaps with a measure of poetic licence, by Bertolucci in his epic film *The Last Emperor*. Nevertheless, the life and times of Pu Yi were quite extraordinary, and historians have spent considerable time and effort trying to establish a more factual account of his life. Perhaps a clearer picture can be formed from his own account, *From Emperor to Citizen*, written with the help of a

ghostwriter a few years before his death in 1967.



Figure 2.5 Pu Yi

When Pu Yi abdicated the throne, ending more than 2,000 years of imperial rule in China, he was permitted to retain his nominal title and continued to live in seclusion in his imperial residence in the Forbidden City in Beijing with an annual allowance of about \$3 million to maintain his lifestyle. Pu Yi was not only the last emperor of China, but also achieved the unusual distinction of becoming an emperor three times. How did this happen?

After the death of President of the Republic Yuan Shikai in 1916, power became fragmented, with the rise of several regional warlords – a period sometimes known as "The Warlord Period" (1916–27). One of these warlords, General Zhang Xun, captured Beijing and restored the dynasty with Pu Yi as emperor once again.

This restoration lasted only twelve days, after which Pu Yi resumed his secluded lifestyle. In 1924, he was forced by another warlord to flee to his father's home in Tianjin, a major port city north of Beijing and afterwards he sought refuge in the Japanese Concession in Tianjin until 1931.

Following the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria – Manchukuo to the Japanese – Pu Yi was installed, firstly as chief executive, then as emperor – the third time he had assumed that title. However, as emperor of Manchukuo, he was regarded as an enemy of China, and consequently a war criminal, following the defeat of Japan in World War II. The Russian Army held Pu Yi in the USSR for five years, then transferred him to Tokyo to appear as a prosecution witness at the war crimes tribunal. In 1950, the Soviets repatriated Pu Yi to China where he was imprisoned and underwent a "re-education" process until 1959, when he received an official amnesty. Thus, the three-time emperor became a private communist citizen.

The Establishment of the Republic of China

Dr Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925): "Father of the Republic"



Figure 2.6 Sun Yat-sen

After the Double Tenth army revolt of 1911 had ended the Qing dynasty, the Republic of China was formally established in 1912.

Dr Sun Yat-sen had spent a considerable part of his adult life outside China, marshalling support, both financial and political, for his lifelong ambition to bring down the imperial system and ensure that China became a modern republic. Whilst in Japan in 1905, he founded the Revolutionary Alliance, a coalition of several Chinese revolutionary groups whose members had fled to Japan or had gone to study at Japanese universities.

Sun's revolutionary life also had some elements of melodrama. In 1896, during a fund-raising visit to London, he was forcibly kidnapped by Chinese agents and taken to the Qing legation, which prepared to charter a special ship to transport the prisoner back to China for execution as a traitor. However, he managed to smuggle a note to Dr James Cantlie, his former medical professor in Hong Kong, who obtained publicity for the case in the *London Times* and the Foreign Office intervened to set him free. These events only served to increase financial support for Sun's cause – the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty.

His many years of revolutionary fervour and overseas campaigning were rewarded when he became the first provisional president of the newly established republic in 1912. Indeed, he is still regarded by many as the father of the republic.

Sun's tenure as provisional president was short-lived. Under pressure from General Yuan Shikai, a powerful northern warlord, he agreed to yield the presidency if Yuan could persuade the last Qing emperor, Xuantong (later known as Henry Pu Yi), to abdicate. The emperor did so, and Sun was replaced by General Yuan. Nevertheless, as the founder of the Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang (KMT), Sun continued to play a major part in China's political arena until his death in 1925.

General Yuan Shikai



Figure 2.7 Yuan Shikai

Yuan Shikai was to become a major player in the events leading up to the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the establishment of the republic in 1912. From a young soldier in the imperial army who had failed his entrance examinations but subsequently managed to purchase his commission, Yuan moved rapidly up the chain of command. His loyalty to the Empress Dowager Cixi, whom he saved from a palace coup, was rewarded with the governorship of Shandong Province and later with the post of commander-in-chief of the imperial forces.

Following the death of his patron, Cixi, he formed an alliance with Sun Yat-sen's Revolutionary Alliance and supported Sun's nomination as first provisional president of the new republic.

Yuan shortly after assumed the presidency with support from the warlords, most of whom he had trained and had arranged to equip their armies with modern weaponry through loans from foreign countries.

However, President Yuan became a virtual dictator, dismissed disloyal government officials, and formally dissolved Sun's Nationalist Party in 1914.

He eventually met his downfall when he attempted to establish a new dynasty with himself as emperor but was frustrated by the actions of several competing warlords. He died in 1916.

For a short time after the death of Yuan Shikai, a reasonably stable government continued in Beijing with Duan Qirui as premier, until his rule was interrupted by the warlord General Zhang Xun, who captured Beijing and set up a Qing restoration. He declared the boy Pu Yi emperor once again, but Premier Duan soon regained power.

May Fourth Movement of 1919



Figure 2.8 Students in Beijing during the May Fourth Movement

At the end of World War I, widespread demonstrations occurred in China against the terms of the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference, which awarded the treaty rights of the Province of Shandong – previously held by Germany – to Japan as a form of reward for its wartime efforts against Germany. However, the Chinese Government had already made a secret deal with Japan in 1918 agreeing with the latter's claim on Shandong. When this became public knowledge, the Chinese people were infuriated by this betrayal, especially since they had suffered a humiliating wartime defeat by the Japanese in 1894–95 over China's previously accepted supremacy in Korea.

On 4 May 1919, student representatives from Beijing universities and colleges held a mass meeting in front of the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Tiananmen Square, urging the Chinese people to protest at the perceived betrayal. The Chinese cabinet minister to Japan was physically assaulted, his house was set on fire, and the entire country erupted in protest. The movement grew into a year-long boycott of Japanese goods, resulting in the resignation of the Chinese cabinet and the refusal of the Chinese delegation to sign the terms of the Versailles Peace Treaty concluding the war. The matter was settled at the Washington Conference of 1921 when Japan agreed, under pressure, to withdraw its claims to Shandong.

The May Fourth Movement brought many intellectuals and political thinkers into the Marxist fold. Among these was Mao Zedong, the founder of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, who was working as a librarian at Beijing University at the time. A new body of public opinion in China sprang from the students and intellectuals and, together with the growth of the Communist movement, rapidly gained momentum. As many of them turned to Marxism, they shaped the future of China from the peasant base up. In addition, the threat and reality of Japanese power awoke feelings of patriotism and national self-consciousness, unified resistance, and indirectly aided the Communists in their rise to power.

Conclusion

The fall of the Qing dynasty, leading to the establishment of the republic, could be attributed to a combination of events: continuing attacks by foreign powers, including China's powerful neighbour Japan; the dominant, but corrupt, influence of the ruthless Empress Dowager Cixi; and the sustained momentum of internal public rebellion.

This period was followed by the rise of regional warlords in struggles for power that splintered the nation, fomented peasant discontent, and provided a fertile platform for the development of the two main opposing political ideologies – the Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang, and the Chinese Communist Party.

In the next unit, we will follow the power struggles that continued to upset stable governance in China and saw the fortunes of these two opposing parties fluctuate dramatically over the subsequent decades.

Activity 2

1. Look at this Internet site www.mnsu.edu/prehistory/china to gain an insight into the Qing Dynasty and its place in Chinese history.
2. What do you consider to be the main reasons for the fall of the last dynasty?
3. Dr. Sun Yat-sen was, and still is, regarded as the "Father of the Republic". Why?

*Share your thoughts with others on the **Course Discussion Forum**.*

Next - The Power Struggles

In Unit 3, we will follow the power struggles over the next three decades between the three main protagonists – Kuomintang, Chinese Communist Party, and Japan – until 1 October 1949 when Chairman Mao proclaimed the People's Republic of China.

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